



# Grand view

Ascend the rotunda's staircase to appreciate a mural of Texas history

By **JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN**  
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When it's right under your feet, it's hard to make out exactly what it is — a terrazzo swirl of colors and abstract shapes.

But climb the circular granite staircase that rings the rotunda of the Texas State History Museum and from the third floor, the scene comes into focus.

Occupying the center of the 40-foot-diameter circular floor mural is the image of a campfire, a plume of white smoke curling upward. Around the campfire is a symbolic gathering of Texas figures and icons. A Mexican vaquero family, a mesquite tree, a Texas Ranger, prickly pears and bluebonnets, longhorns, Buffalo Soldiers, cowboys and cowgirls, yucca, a Spanish conquistador, a "Rosie the Riveter" and an oilfield roughneck, a Native American family. Rimming the perimeter are the words "Born Around the Campfires of Our Past, The Story of Texas."

And though the mural is the initial image to greet museum visitors, perhaps the fact that you best take it all in from a distance is a metaphor of the history museum itself: that's it's only when you step back from the past to appreciate the larger view do you have a true perspective on history.

The mural is the creation of Robert T. Ritter, a fifth-generation Texan artist and architect who resides in Santa Fe, N.M. Although his main occupation is the practice of architecture, the 50-year-old Texas Tech grad and Amarillo native also paints historically based figurative scenes. "The whole project has been a perfect cross between my painting and my architecture," said Ritter, who pored over history books to come up with pertinent icons.

Ritter's design is made up of 47 cus-

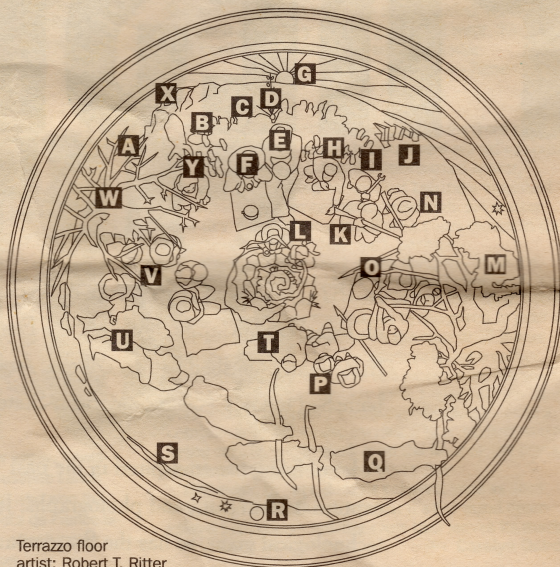
tom colors of epoxy terrazzo separated by thin brass stripping. In all, some 1¼ miles of brass were used. Ritter started the design process by sketching the scene in pencil and rotating the image around to get the perspective right. He then produced a color drawing for museum officials to approve. Next, Ritter digitized the drawing, making patterns for the brass workers. Finally, Ritter produced a full-scale matrix, which was transferred to the museum floor.

"Essentially I had to create a paint-by-number pattern for the tile craftsman to follow," said Ritter. Fitting more than 200,000 pieces is a monumental task, but the craftsmen, led by Servando Rodriguez of National Terrazzo, misplaced only six small pieces. "It was phenomenal, the accuracy of the craftspeople," says Ritter, who spent the past several months in and out of Austin supervising the mural's fabrication.

Not only its imagery gives the mural a symbolic charge. The image is aligned along the cardinal points of its geographic location. The horizon follows the perimeter of the circle and provides directional orientation to the geographic features of the Texas landscape. To the west, the sun sets over the Llano Estacado; to the east, the moon rises. The Palo Duro Canyon peeks out to the northwest, while to the southeast lies the Gulf of Mexico. To the southwest lies a mission and Big Bend, and to the south, Mexico.

"I wanted to portray the landscape of Texas from that one center point where the mural actually is," said Ritter. "I wanted to give it a real sense of where it is in Texas and in Austin."

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Terrazzo floor  
artist: Robert T. Ritter

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|--|---|
| <b>A</b> Mission                           | <b>N</b> Conquistador                   |
| <b>B</b> Bluebonnets                       | <b>O</b> Native American family         |
| <b>C</b> Prickly pear                      | <b>P</b> Buffalo soldiers               |
| <b>D</b> Yucca                             | <b>Q</b> Longhorns leading you upstairs |
| <b>E</b> Texas Ranger                      | <b>R</b> Rising moon                    |
| <b>F</b> Cowboy                            | <b>S</b> Gulf of Mexico                 |
| <b>G</b> Sunset over Llano Estacado (west) | <b>T</b> African American laundress     |
| <b>H</b> "Rosie the Riveter"               | <b>U</b> Horses                         |
| <b>I</b> Roughneck                         | <b>V</b> Mexican vaquero family         |
| <b>J</b> Palo Duro Canyon                  | <b>W</b> Mesquite                       |
| <b>K</b> Davy Crockett and Ole Betsy       | <b>X</b> Big Bend                       |
| <b>L</b> Cowgirl and cowboy                | <b>Y</b> Missionary and burro           |
| <b>M</b> Treaty Oak                        |   |

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Larry Kolvoord/ American-Statesman