

# 'Sistine Chukker' reappears

Spoof mural  
gets new home  
at Downtown  
Trading Co.



2/27

By Drew Taylor  
Special to the Tuscaloosa News

## TUSCALOOSA

The Chukker was a regular hangout for all sorts of people for nearly 50 years before it closed in 2003.

The bar, known for live music, the band stickers on the wall and its long, welcoming bar, had been home to the "Sistine Chukker," a 16-panel painting on the ceiling based on the famous Michaelangelo fresco in the Sistine Chapel.

When The Chukker closed its doors, then-owner Will Harris decided the artwork was too valuable to be destroyed. Rich Marcks, a local artist and regular patron of the bar, was called to remove the painting, which had hung on the ceiling for nearly 30 years, and find a suitable new home.

"He was probably the most well-known artist who was hanging out there at the time," said Rod Walker, owner of the Downtown Trading Co., where the painting is now being installed. Marcks is building back-



STAFF PHOTO | MICHAEL E. PALMER



To see video of "Sistine Chukker," visit [www.tuscaloosaneews.com](http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com).

Rich Marcks lays out "Sistine Chukker" panels at the Downtown Trading Co.

"He was probably the most well-known artist who was hanging out there at the time," said Rod Walker, owner of the Downtown Trading Co., where the painting is now being installed. Marcks is building backboards for the pieces and is touching up torn spots.

Walker, who began frequenting the Chukker in 1979, said the painting was one way to tell if someone was new to the bar. Like tourists in Manhattan, they would crane their necks, looking up, taking in the ceiling.

Walker said he thought it would be important to preserve it in his store.

"To me, it means hanging on to a remnant of what was there," he said.



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Walker got involved when his wife, who was driving past the Chukker before the building was torn down, saw there was no way Marcks could get the 16-piece painting back home.

"Rich had no car; he had a bike," Walker said.

### Well-preserved history

After 34 years, the painting is in unusually good condition. Marcks attributes that, in part, to the tar from the many cigarettes smoked in

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the Chukker over the years, which he said could act as a shield against decay and bugs.

"Take this over a period of 30 years, and it is a big reason why it is in the shape that it is in," Marcks said.

Artist Tom Bradford said he created the painting out of necessity. He had run up a tab at the bar one night in 1974, and Bob Callahan, the owner at the time, came up with an idea for paying it off.

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# MURAL

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"He said, 'Why don't you paint something on the ceiling?'" Bradford said.

Bradford decided to paint something similar to Michelangelo's "Creation of Man." He went to the bar one Saturday and started drawing on the ceiling with chalk but became frustrated and decided to approach

it in a less strenuous way.

"It hit me that we could do it on black mat board and attach it to the ceiling," Bradford said.

Bradford said it took him more than 74 hours to complete the project, and not everyone appreciated the effort. There were some comments that it was sacrilegious and in bad taste because it was based on a religious painting.

Bradford said that was not his intention at all.

"It is art about art," Bradford

said.

In addition to the figures of Adam and God, the painting has planets and stars, and beer cans in the background.

"It represented the age of decadence," Bradford said. "I was trying to turn normal things into an hallucinogenic experience."

As an artist, Marcks appreciates the "Sistine Chukker" for the same reason he appreciates any piece of art: its originality.

"It is a pretty interesting piece of work," Marcks said. "It's a lit-

tle twisted, but it has a humorous side."

Now that he is giving the "Sistine Chukker" a new home, Walker is reminiscing about what the bar meant to the community.

"It was a bohemian, beatnik-type place with a lot of artists and musicians," her said. "It was more suited toward Greenwich Village in New York."

"When it was gone, there was not anything in Tuscaloosa that was like it."