

# FOCUS online

NCSU LIBRARIES  
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## PART IV LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

ART IN THE LIBRARIES:  
THE JOE COX *COLOR WALL*

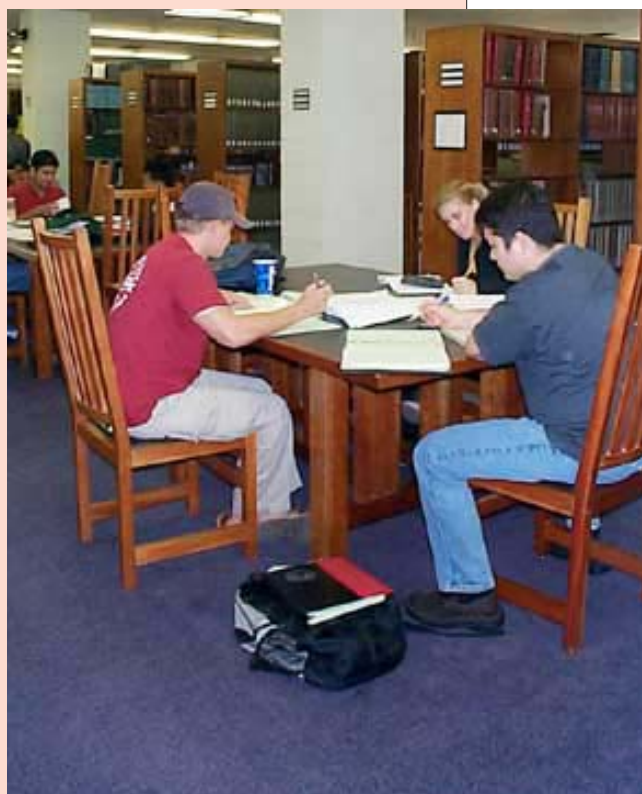
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TERRY CROW, NCSU LIBRARIES.

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

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## DEVELOPMENT UPDATE



*Joe Cox, pictured in his Raleigh studio in 1956. From Special Collections.*

### Art in the Libraries: *The Joe Cox Color Wall*

By **KAREN CICCONE**, NATURAL RESOURCES LIBRARY,  
AND **JUNE BROTHERTON**, ADMINISTRATION AND ADVANCEMENT

**D**riving 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

collection of art includes paintings by George Bireline (former faculty member in the School of Design), Rick Horton (graduate of the College of Engineering), and Wayne Taylor (professor emeritus, College of Design) among others. Nutter explains, “Over the years, distinguished faculty members have donated their works of art to the Libraries, while other artwork has been donated to or commissioned for the Libraries to commemorate special occasions in the life of the university. Exposure to these works of art broaden students’ educational experience, help nurture an atmosphere of creativity, and make the Libraries more comfortable and welcoming.”

The Joe Cox *Color Wall* became a popular campus landmark for students who attended NC State in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. Created in 1972, the *Color Wall* was commissioned by Chancellor John T. Caldwell to celebrate the opening of the new D. H. Hill Library tower. Caldwell chose Cox (1915–1997) to create a piece that would form an integral design feature of the new tower structure. Working on the principles of color mixing, the piece Cox created provided a spectacular visual display while also demonstrating aspects of the physics of light in a manner appropriately reflecting the science, engineering, and technology focus of the NC State campus.

Cox, a faculty member in NC State’s School of Design from 1954 until 1980, created paintings in an unmistakable style that lyrically explored viewers’ perceptions of color, light, and space. A well-loved and influential teacher, his courses often had waiting lists. One of his courses, “Design Fundamentals: Color and Light,” gave design students an understanding of the physical nature of these elements to incorporate into their works. The *Color Wall* is a perfect embodiment of Cox’s own interests in these areas.

During the same period, Cox created several other light murals similar to the *Color Wall*. One piece, created in 1966, was for the Southern National Bank in Lumberton, North Carolina. Another, still existing yet in a state of disrepair comparable to the *Color Wall*, was installed in 1967 in the ceiling of the Central Carolina Bank Building in Durham, North Carolina.

In its heyday, the D. H. Hill Library’s *Color Wall* operated from 7:00 to 11:00 P.M. every night. Designed to be viewed from across

*Donations to restore  
the Cox Color Wall  
and to help maintain  
other works of art  
in the Libraries’  
collection may be  
sent to:*

*NCSU Libraries,  
Development Office,  
Campus Box 7111,  
Raleigh, N.C.  
27695-7111.*

*Donations to this fund  
are fully tax deductible. ❖*

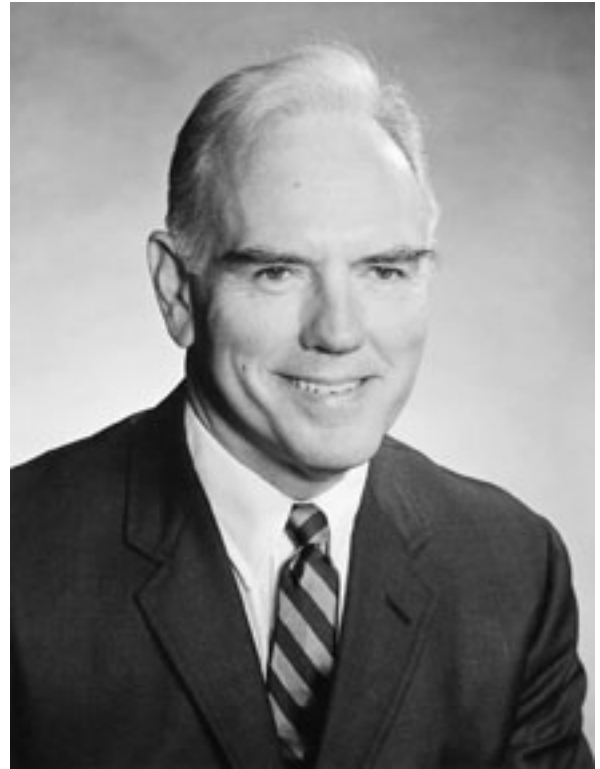
Hillsborough Street through the windowed first floor of the tower, twenty-three lights in seven different colors shone on the wall, creating lighter hues in their overlap. A mechanical timer, which operated the lights, caused the pattern to change approximately every four seconds. According to one source\*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

\*Max Halperen, *The Floating World of Joe Cox* (Raleigh: Friends of Joe Cox, 1995): 24.

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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