

RESCUE PUBLIC MURALS



PRESS RELEASE

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Homage to Seurat: La Grande Jatte in Harlem...

HISTORIC HARLEM MURAL RESTORED

...a project of the National Initiative RESCUE PUBLIC MURALS

Thanks to a talented team of artists and conservators, a restored **HOMAGE TO SEURAT: LA GRANDE JATTE IN HARLEM**, the 1986 community mural by **Eva Cockcroft**, once again provides a brilliant and luminous backdrop to the adjacent Hope Steven Garden (West 142nd Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Hamilton Place). Over 20 years of exposure to sun, wind, rain and wall repairs had rendered the mural's intensely colored paint—greens, turquoise, reds, purples and yellows—dull, faded and abraded.

Eva Cockcroft (1936-99)—a muralist, studio painter, writer and teacher—was an important figure in both the New York and national community mural movements. *Homage to Seurat*—which covers two 30' x 30' sections of the building's wall—is her only remaining mural in New York City.

The restoration was a project of **RESCUE PUBLIC MURALS**, an innovative, national program based in Washington, D.C. Launched in 2006, Rescue Public Murals brings attention to the significant historic and artistic value of community murals and generates national and local support to save these endangered works of art and ensure their survival for several more decades. The restoration of *Homage to Seurat: La Grande Jatte in Harlem* was made possible by **FRIENDS OF HERITAGE PRESERVATION**, a private charitable group that seeks to promote cultural identity through the preservation of significant endangered artistic and historic works, artifacts, and sites. **Golden Artist Colors** also provided support for the project.

“Like our garden, which was established in 1983 and is now permanent, *Homage to Seurat* has become a beloved fixture in our Hamilton Heights neighborhood,” says garden representative **Ginny Outlaw**. “We are very pleased that the mural has been restored to its former beauty.”

New York City muralist **Janet Braun-Reinitz**, a colleague of Cockcroft's who has painted over 50 murals in the United States and abroad, directed the restoration, working in collaboration with muralists Rochelle Shicoff and Maria Dominguez. Three young women from local arts organizations assisted the muralists. They are Alexandra Unthank from Harlem Arts Alliance, Jessica Guzman from CAW4Kids (Creative Arts Workshop), and Ariel Mercado from Children's Art Carnival. New York City conservator **Harriet Irgang Alden** of Rustin Levenson Art Conservation consulted on the project.

“The fading and flaking of the original paint was largely due to the fact that the wall was not primed before painting,” states Irgang Alden. “We determined that the mural would need to be repainted in order to be preserved.” Paint samples from the original mural are being studied by the **Winterthur/University of Delaware graduate programs in art conservation** and the **Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles**. Preliminary findings have shown how Cockcroft originally prepared the wall and that some areas were overpainted with different colors. “This absolutely confirmed what we found in certain areas of the mural,” say Braun-Reinitz. “There were endless changes in the big trees. On the other hand, no changes were made in the extensive dark areas, as well as the land, water and sky, which were painted with great clarity and crispness.”

The artists used Cockcroft’s slides that were taken when the mural was completed in 1986 and presented the most accurate depiction of the colors, to “establish the basic palette of colors—our first big challenge,” reflects Braun-Reinitz. “Working slowly, we mixed the darkest background blue, the most prominent brighter green, and the lightest color, a pale yellow green, thus recreating the range of colors of the original mural. The accuracy of each additional color was not only measured against these colors and the original visuals, but also with the neighboring colors and the flow of colors across the mural.” Mixing the paints was an ongoing process. Approximately 100 hours were devoted to the faithful matching and mixing of more than 70 colors, over 30 of them green. Some colors were easily produced, others took longer. A sky blue required three hours to achieve an accurate hue.

The American tradition of outdoor community murals—collaborations between artists and neighborhood groups—began in the late 1960s and over four decades has contributed vibrant landmarks to cities and towns across the country. As the years have passed, many of these fragile artworks have deteriorated markedly. In addition to *Homage to Seurat*, Rescue Public Murals has identified and assessed the condition of important and endangered murals in Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, Santa Fe, El Paso, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco and is planning to work with these communities to secure the funds necessary to restore them.

Rescue Public Murals has also received funding from the Getty Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Booth Heritage Foundation, and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOLLOWS.

**PHOTOGRAPHS CAN BE DOWNLOADED FROM
www.heritagepreservation.org/RPM/photos.html**

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

HOMAGE TO SEURAT: LA GRANDE JATTE IN HARLEM

In 1986, Hope Steven Community Garden (then known as the West Harlem Group Assistance Garden) was selected to participate in Artists in the Gardens, a project of GreenThumb, the community gardening program sponsored by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. From a roster of artists chosen by a panel of art professionals, the gardeners selected Eva Cockcroft to paint a mural on the building facing their garden.

Initially daunted by the heavily textured stucco surface of the wall, Eva Cockcroft realized she could use it to her advantage and developed a design inspired by the pointillist painting *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884* by Georges Seurat (which today hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago). Adapting several figures in the Post-Impressionist work—working class Parisians enjoying a weekend afternoon on a island park in the middle of the Seine—Cockcroft transferred the setting to New York and heightened Seurat’s muted colors to reflect Harlem’s Sunday best finery. Cockcroft designed the mural by projecting photographs of building’s façade onto large sheets of paper hung on the walls of her studio, working with the stucco shapes to determine the composition and color. Hands, elbows, and the faces of the figures, for example, are painted on the raised stucco portions to give them a sense of three-dimensionality.

TREATMENT

Reviewing photographs taken when the mural was newly completed in 1986 and examining the wall’s current state, muralist Janet Braun-Reinitz and conservator Harriet Irgang Alden discovered that the wall was not primed before painting, and that if it was sealed upon the mural’s completion, little evidence remains. Moreover, cracks and leaks in the building required the replastering of a large section of the wall, obliterating imagery. Original documentation also revealed that the mural was painted with Golden Artist Colors’ acrylic paint. After consulting with Golden, it was decided to apply a clear coating of Golden’s Soft Gel Gloss to the wall which would not only serve as primer layer for subsequent repainting, but would also allow the original colors and shapes to be more clearly seen. The artists used many of the pigments available in 1986, and probably selected by Cockcroft, as well as certain colors Golden has improved since then. Special attention was paid to matching the colors that Cockcroft mixed herself, and these paints have been recorded for future reference. The completed mural received another layer of Soft Gel Gloss as a protective layer between the paint and the final top coat of reversible Golden MSA Varnish which contains properties to protect the paint layer from the sun’s ultraviolet rays. The varnish will also allow future caretakers to gently clean the mural without harming the newly applied paint.

CONSERVATION RESEARCH

Homage to Seurat has provided a unique case study for conservation researchers who focus on materials. Researching the degradation of paints used in outdoor murals, Amanda Norbutus, a student in the University of Delaware’s Preservation Studies Doctoral Program, is conducting cross-sectional analysis, infrared spectroscopy and other tests on small paint and mortar samples from the mural. Studying the aging characteristics of acrylics, Dr. Thomas Learner, Senior

Scientist and Head of Modern and Contemporary Art Research at the Getty Conservation Institute is testing samples of the mural gathered before the restoration was begun. In the case of *Homage to Seurat*, understanding which paints have faded the least may be instructive in creating future paints or protective coatings that are better able to withstand outdoor environments. To aid in continued research, a small portion of the lower left wall, divided into five 2" x 2" sections, has been set aside as a control area. The first section will not be treated at all; another will receive the transparent sealing and priming layer of Golden Soft Gel Gloss; the third will be primed and repainted; the next will be primed, repainted, and receive a top coat of Golden Soft Gel gloss; and the final fifth section will receive all the restoration steps. Conservators will be able to visit this portion of the mural in the years to come and check on the performance of the materials. If in the future the mural paint begins to fail or discolor, these control areas may reveal whether the fault lies with the colored paint or the sealing materials.

RESCUE PUBLIC MURALS

Founded by **Will Shank** (an independent conservator and the former head of conservation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) and mural historian **Tim Drescher** (author of *San Francisco Murals: Community Creates its Muse, 1914-1994* and the co-editor of *Community Murals* magazine from 1976 to 1987), Rescue Public Murals aims to document, publicize and conserve significant outdoor murals. As Drescher notes, "Murals are important to their communities and to the people who live and work near them every day. Yet they are fast disappearing. Rescue Public Murals' goal is to build public awareness and generate national and local support to save these endangered works of art."

Launched in late 2006, Rescue Public Murals is a program of Heritage Preservation, a national non-profit organization whose mission is to preserve the nation's heritage for future generations through innovative leadership, education, and programs. **Kristen Overbeck Laise**, who directs Rescue Public Murals, points out, "Community murals not only are treasured landmarks in their neighborhoods, they also play a significant role in our nation's artistic and cultural heritage, and we are committed to securing the expertise and support to save them." Rescue Public Murals also serves as a clearinghouse of outdoor mural best practices so that artists working today can use techniques and materials that ensure the longest life for their work

Rescue Public Murals has also received support from the Getty Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

For more information about the project go to www.rescuepublicmurals.org or contact Rescue Public Murals, Heritage Preservation, Inc., 1012 14th Street NW, Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20005, 202.233.0800.

FRIENDS OF HERITAGE PRESERVATION

Founded in 1998 by art historian and conservator **Suzanne Deal Booth** and her husband **David G. Booth**, Friends of Heritage Preservation is a private charitable group that partners with experts, scholars and other organizations dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage. Fostering associations with local groups that work to revitalize communities and strengthen connections to individual cultural heritage, Friends of Heritage Preservation works to increase global awareness for the plight of endangered works, artifacts and sites. More information is available at www.fohpinfo.org.

EVA COCKCROFT (1936-99)

Eva Cockcroft was a founder in 1983 and the first president of Artmakers Inc., an artist-run, politically-oriented community mural organization that works in collaboration with local residents to create public art relevant to their lives and concerns. In 1985, she directed the 26-mural cycle *La Lucha Mural Park* in Manhattan's East Village as well as park's central panel *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* (30' x 40'). Today, only traces of some smaller panels exist. Cockcroft earned a reputation as a prominent visual artist and social commentator during the activist 1960s, and her large-scale murals reflected a lifelong commitment to human rights.

In 1983, Cockcroft wrote: "Painted images cannot stop wars or win the struggle for justice, but they are not irrelevant. They fortify and enrich the spirit of those who are committed to the struggle and help to educate those who are unaware." Following the completion of *Homage to Seurat*, Cockcroft—joined by Artmakers colleagues and using leftover materials—painted the anti-drug mural *Push Crack Back* on the building directly opposite the garden, a response to neighborhood residents who, stopping to admire *Seurat*, spoke of the devastating effect of drugs on neighborhood youth. *Push Crack Back* was destroyed when the abandoned building on which it was painted was renovated.

Cockcroft widely exhibited her studio work, and her book *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (co-authored with John Pitman Weber and James Cockcroft, 1977, reissued 1998 with an afterword by Tim Drescher) remains a seminal analysis of the movement's early years.

JANET BRAUN-REINITZ

The current President of Artmakers Inc., Janet Braun-Reinitz is a community muralist who has painted more than 50 community murals, primarily in New York City. She has also worked in Savannah, Pensacola, San Francisco, and Greenfield (MA) as well as Nicaragua, Cuba, Georgia, England and Rome. In October 2009, she will travel to Bhopal, India, to paint a mural commemorating the 25th anniversary of the chemical disaster. Braun-Reinitz is a frequent guest artist in New York City's public schools, for which she has developed many art and design programs, and has exhibited her work in New York City, nationally and abroad. She is the co-author of *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City* (with Jane Weissman, University Press of Mississippi, 2009) and *The Mural Book: A Practical Guide for Educators* (with Rochelle Shicoff, Crystal Productions, 2001).

HARRIET IRGANG ALDEN

Harriet Irgang Alden directs the New York office of Rustin Levenson Art Conservation Associates, which specializes in the conservation of easel paintings and murals. She received a Masters degree in Art History and a Diploma in Conservation from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Before joining Rustin Levenson in 1984, she worked at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1998, Irgang Alden spent three months in Amsterdam treating paintings from the 17th to 19th centuries at the invitation of the Stichting Kollektief Restauratie Atelier and, since 2004, she has traveled as a contract conservator for the Guggenheim Museum. Recent projects include the restoration of the Beacon Theater murals, Maxfield Parrish's *Old King Cole* at the St. Regis Hotel, and *Panorama of Military History* at West Point. Irgang Alden is the author of "Considering Artists' Intent in the Public Arena" (*Postprints*, AIC Paintings Specialty Group, 1994) and is currently the Vice President of the New York Regional Association for Conservation.