

The Women in The Procession Mural

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Sojourner Truth, a nineteenth century American slave-turned-abolitionist and feminist inspired a mural I worked on in 1995 with SUNY New Paltz graduate students. The mural addressed the themes and issues of Truth's life (see Asher, 1998). Thinking about those struggles made me reflect on my own and other people's stories. Both my grandmothers fled Russia during the Czar's brutal programs, when Jews were murdered. My paternal grandfather and parents were born in the United States. My father fought against Hitler during WWII. Family members told me how he felt it necessary to physically defend himself against American GI's who called him "dirty Jew." Neither they, nor my parents, are living today to interview, but my mother-in-law is, and she told me the story of her procession to America. Born and raised in Freiburg, Germany, she was 13 when, on the 9th of November 1938, her synagogue was burned during the Kristallnacht anti-Jewish riots. The image of flames pouring out of smashed windows moved me greatly. Listening to her memories of packing a small suitcase and leaving her parents to go to Switzerland on a "children's transport," and seven years later boarding a boat from Le Havre, France, with 20 little children under her care to America,

I wanted to know more. Images of separation, loss, uncertainty, and hope came through her words. As a muralist who has worked in many parts of the country and researched many people's stories, that was the first time I looked closely at this woman's narrative which led to a story about my own locale, Queens, New York. It was here that my idea for this project began.

The borough of Queens is significant to the history of immigration in New York City. In the 1900s Queens had a population of 152,099. The 2002 population figure is estimated to be more than three million. I wanted to illuminate this unique immigration history through the creation of a mural. My experiences in teaching art education at Queens College in New York City convinced me that a mural class was valuable because it offers students an opportunity to link history with art. Funded by the college President's Innovative Teaching Grant, in February 2000, the Art Education Department offered a mural painting workshop. Eleven students developed, planned, and executed a mural under my direction. Through artistic interpretation, the project offered the local community a deeper understanding of the generations who came before us. One goal of the project

was to reflect the tolerance of difference through an awareness of local history and values concerning cultural heritage, migration and

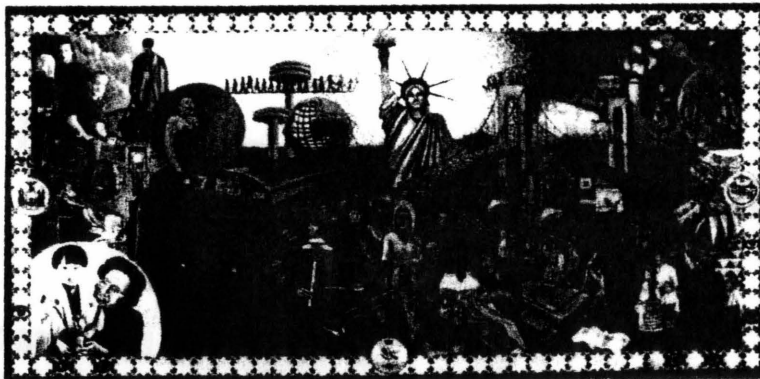


Figure 1: *The Procession Mural*, 8'x16', acrylic on boards. Rosenthal Library at Queens College, CUNY

immigration. Students were encouraged to find their personal approaches to qualitative, interdisciplinary, and multicultural teaching. The four months of working together allowed them to better understand the complexities of group activity in a cooperative learning environment. The aesthetic challenge for the class was to produce a professional and sophisticated work of public art that tells a story.

Sojourner Truth was a feminist educator who gave public lectures about the wrongs of slavery and the cause of women to gain the right to vote at a time when women, especially black women, were not encouraged to speak. Today, women's voices are still often unheard and overlooked in art, art history and other related fields. Although both men and women's narratives are represented in the *Procession* piece, this article highlights those of women in the *Procession* who strove to go beyond traditional roles of wife and motherhood. By studying these women's stories and understanding their experiences, contemporary women and men can learn how they were able to reach their potential in art, education, technology, and the performing arts. Like Sojourner Truth at the turn of the last cen-

tury, women's stories are a vital component of our collective history that should be included in all classrooms.

Beginnings

Mural painting presents a very

effective way of telling a story that is revealed through a combination of color, line, and form within a large public space. The process offered a cooperative learning environment, where Queen's community members and College faculty had input into the final sketch through a College Advisory Committee. The procedures included three preliminary steps: (1) gathering oral histories of the lives of a cross-section of people who represent the area; (2) historical research; and (3) design decisions.

Before formally introducing the art of interviewing to the class, the performance artist, oral historian, and director, Judith Sloan, was invited to our first session and brought oral history to life for our group. Most of the class had never interviewed anyone before. Judith taught the group how to observe an individual while considering their physical characteristics, tone of voice, or mannerisms, while interviewing, so that particular observations could be later incorporated into sketches. The students found her advice essential in capturing the 'spirit' of the people they interviewed. Applying techniques and processes from the book *Oral History in*

the Secondary School Classroom, by B. Lanman and G. Mehaffy (1989), students conducted audio-taped interviews with two or three generations of their family to find out about their families' histories. Some of the questions included:

Who were the first family members to settle in this country? Tell me the story you know about their first day in America. What was it like going to school? A job? A date? What made them decide to live in Queens? And why?

The master tapes have been deposited in the Queens College Rosenthal Library and are available for public use, along with a brief description of each tape's contents. As an outcome of these oral histories, the class as a whole presented their impressions of immigration and migration through photographs, drawings, collages, and paintings.

Movement as Story

Choreographer and teacher Carolyn Bilderback led a workshop for the class, *Experiencing Story Through Movement*. This was an opportunity for individual creativity, where participants were invited to interact with each other in order to get in touch with their own bodies and become aware of movements they could make alone and with others. Standing barefoot in the art studio, we were asked to stretch, swing, move, and let go of any prior knowledge or experience of movement and dance. Through a sequence of simple exercises we explored ways of becoming aware of our bodies and making choices in representing ourselves through actions and feelings. There was

both movement in one place and movement that swept across the room.

The workshop ended with Carolyn asking us to choose an example of a movement, based on the life of a person we already interviewed. Some included: packing a suitcase, sweeping, sewing, washing dishes, dancing, singing, walking, looking for someone, lifting, saying goodbye, and carrying suitcases. The purpose of this workshop was to have the group experience body awareness inspired by descriptions in the interviews, and to better understand the power of gesture, connecting the mind and body with drawing. Maxine Greene writes, "This stress on process, on movement, on the union of the mind and body seems to be of importance to our personal lives, as it is to the lives of those we teach" (2001, p.95). Carolyn helped the group find ways of developing deeper understandings of movement as part of their daily lives. After two hours, participants came away with the joy of having moved by themselves and with peers in new ways. In applying these movement experiences to art, students were able to recall a sweeping gesture of their arms or legs and apply this into their drawings. The workshop provided approaches to an aesthetic experience as a basis for deeper understanding of the connections between movement and drawing. Mural painting was a very physical process because the individual panels had to be carried up and down a flight of stairs in the studio for each class. These movements also offered us techniques to warm-up our bodies before class and enabled us to "uncouple from the ordinary" (p. 69). To leave the pressures of the day behind,

to be present and focus our thoughts on what needed our attention.

Illustrating the Stories

One of the illustrations based on the interviews is graduate student John Filardi's rendering of a Chinese woman's account of her childhood escape from Shanghai to Hong Kong (depicted on the upper right side of the mural). John interviewed Mrs. Hsu while her daughter translated the story. She had escaped at night and he drew her mother's face behind bars crying for the loss of her family. When John learned that Hsu's name was the same word for chrysanthemum in Chinese, he began sketching the train she had described to him, showing the teardrops change into chrysanthemum petals as the train roared through a field of chrysanthemums. The sketch showed both sorrow and joy. Mrs. Hsu's mother knew that her daughter's flight to Hong Kong would save her life, yet she had to remain behind (See Figure 2).

Neon Nails is a familiar sign in many Queens neighborhoods. Few people consider the stories of the lives of the people who work there. There is an image on the left side of the mural that is based on an interview of a Korean woman who left her homeland for a better life. She supports her family by working in a Queens nail salon.

Doretta Poris interviewed her mother who



Figure 2. Detail of the Procession Mural, *Escape from Shanghai*, Painted by John Filardi

described her mother's leaving Italy to attend school in the United States. Unable to enroll for classes, she worked in a sweatshop before moving to Queens. Poris sketched her grandmother based on her mother's description and family photographs. Her portrait is in the center of the

mural, showing her grandmother at a sewing machine. Several women are depicted in the line of people walking into the mural including: Indonesian, Mexican, Greek, Russian, Native American, and East Indian women. A Guatemalan woman is shown weaving on a loom with a baby on her back. This profile figure brings the viewer into the piece through the curved shape her weaving creates intersecting with the lines of the bridges.

In almost each interview the notion of the Statue of Liberty representing hope and freedom in the United States was repeated. The upper right hand corner of the mural shows a group of Jews from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Austria, and Germany, representing millions of families who came to the United States to escape from the horrors they left behind: a czar and his oppressive army, a fascist leader, stagnation, hatred, discrimination, brutality, hopelessness (See Figure 3). The line of three women and a baby, two men, and a child represent those who came with whatever they could manage to carry with them — valises,

packages, boxes, bundles, and children in their arms (Thalmann & Feinerman, 1974). They had a dream of hope for a new beginning. Painted in sepia tones, to emphasize an earlier time period, the group is seen stepping out of the past and into a brighter future. The first

stop for most, after passing through immigration services on Ellis Island, was Manhattan's Lower East Side. Many of these people left to resettle in Brooklyn, later, The Bronx and Queens. These other boroughs seemed more like suburbs at the time and presented an alternative to the overcrowded area of lower Manhattan.

Someone thought that the Statue of Liberty would be too much of an American symbol and dominate the scene. Another student felt that since we focused on Queens's images and people, we should not include a Manhattan icon. Others explained that often, when people first came to the United States, they went somewhere else before Queens, such as the Lower East Side, Harlem, Washington Heights, Brooklyn, The Bronx, or Chinatown, and only later ventured to this "outer" borough. In many of the interviews the Statute of Liberty symbolized freedom, a sense of home and safety for the first time in a long journey. Anya Borysenko, an immigrant herself, designed the Statue of Liberty and a ship docked at Ellis Island. She recalled her parents who escaped the Ukraine, leaving their careers and possessions behind in



Figure 3. Detail of the Procession Mural, *Leaving their Homeland*. Painted by Rikki Asher

order to be free of the communist government. She was six years old when she and her family landed in New York City in 1949. Monica Goetzen's sister is a Polish immigrant who met her husband in New York. She designed a portrait of her sister's new family in the

lower center of the mural. Donna Theobald sketched one of her students, an adolescent girl who immigrated to New York from Guyana, shown in the center near Louis Armstrong.

Altering the Plan

There were students who preferred not to interview family members or friends and opted to investigate the lives of famous Queens's residents. The Queens Historical Society was a resource for these class members. Lyne Molinari designed the cameo of Billie Holiday and an imaginative representation of Helen Keller, who both lived in Queens. Laura Fradella drew Lena Horne and Anya Borysenko included Louis Armstrong blowing his horn. He lived in Corona, Queens, for many years with his wife. She felt that music was an integral part of the Queens legacy and ought to be included in the composition. In her research, Molinari discovered that Helen Keller lived in Queens for a short time with her teacher, Anne Sullivan. She drew eyes to represent this blind humanitarian as a surrealist symbol. The eyes were repeated in the mural's quilt border, to depict a kind of witness

of those who came before — as those who witnessed the Procession, seeing what has evolved, watching the present from the past and gazing into the future. She also read about jazz singer Billie Holiday, who moved to Queens as a youngster (Clarke, 1994). Molinari's portrait of Holiday depicts the artist at the height of her career.

Laura Fradella was curious about the story of another singer who lived in Queens, Lena Horne. Through her research she learned that Horne received an honorary doctorate from Yale University (Monti, 1998). She also discovered that the singer once wanted to be a teacher instead of a performer. Fradella realized that the vocalist was both, through her music and social activism. During the 1960s she refused to sing about love, sex and heartache, instead chose songs of freedom, dignity, and humanity (Haskins, 1983). The first African-American to sign a long-term contract with a major film studio, MGM, the mural shows Horne in her early 20s singing into a microphone.

Sometimes interviews did not invoke an image. Cheryl Gallagher spoke with a woman from Dominica, a group of islands south of Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. Unable to find a story line that interested her, she decided to draw from her extensive knowledge of local history. Instead, she created a collage of computer images, of Rockaway and Canarsie Native American tribes, Dutch settlers, and Jackie Robinson. After a group discussion, she simplified the collage and opted to include official seals representing Queens, New York City and New York State. The circle of wampum surrounding a

crossed tulip and a rose is the Queens emblem symbolizing Native Americans, early Dutch, and British history. The Great New York State Seal depicts a landscape in which the sun is rising from behind a range of three mountains. Two ships are sailing on the (Hudson) River. Above the shield, a world globe reveals the North Atlantic Ocean; an American eagle is perched on top of the globe. The shield is supported by two goddesses; the goddess Liberty, who represents freedom, and on the right, the goddess of Justice, blindfolded and holding her scales, symbolizing the ideal that everyone should be treated equally under the law. Damon Tommolino drew a sketch of a Japanese immigrant grandmother holding her grandson based on picture research he conducted on Japanese American families.

All these images became the basis for the mural design and were developed into a cohesive sketch. The College Advisory Board — composed of members of the Library, the Dean of Social Sciences, the Art Department, Black Studies, Jewish Studies, Latin-American Studies, Secondary Education and Youth Services, Women's Studies, and the Korean Institute — was encouraged to give additional comments related to the design. This kind of group enables input and criticism prior to the mural painting and offers support from the community. It also served to diffuse possible misunderstandings in the community by allowing representatives to clarify specifics that might be inadvertently missed by the mural-makers/designers.

Revision of the Vision

After placing the preliminary drawings in chronological order, the images were reexamined. We looked at works by well-known muralists Diego Rivera, Aaron Douglas, and Judy Bacca, and murals that I directed, for ideas regarding color and composition. The stories were there right in front of us, like pieces of a puzzle. From close to 50 drawings, a composite sketch was created that brought everyone's ideas together to collectively express The Procession. After the rendering was discussed in class, it was presented to the College Advisory Board and approved. The final image was then transferred onto four 4' by 8' MDO (Medium Density Overlay) professional plywood panels.

Weaving it All Together

Looking at the composite drawing, one student said it reminded her of New York as a melting pot. Some in the group disagreed, saying melting pots are hot and untouchable while mosaics are cold and sharp. The image of New York City being more like a patchwork quilt took hold. Leslie Malar, a quilter in the class, brought a sample of her work to the studio; which was later used as the basis for the border design. The stories seemed to be connected by a thread that is woven through the entire piece, yet all the individual parts remain as they are. The border around the mural uses a repetitive quilt pattern designed to represent these ideas.

After the initial rendering was shown to the College Advisory Committee, the Director of the Library asked if one of the College buildings could be included, as she hoped some of

the people represented in the mural would connect with the college. The Library building, with its memorial clock tower, was suggested and she was delighted. The clock tower was built as a Civil Rights Memorial for three students, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman (a Queens College student), and Michael Schwerner, who joined the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project to work on voter registration. They were kidnapped and murdered in 1964. Learning about the Chaney-Goodman-Schwerner Clock tower left a deep impression on the class and made us realize that the Procession was taking us down roads we never expected to go.

Carrying it On and On

Although this project focused on New York stories, it can easily be adapted to any locale. Linking theory and practice of mural-making highlights the significance of the course in that its application continues beyond the one semester time frame instilling a sense of community through creative expression.

Many of the students are already teaching art in New York City public schools and have begun to use this mural experience in their own classrooms. Some examples include Emily Greenberg's elementary level after-school mural club, whose theme for their mural involved depicting famous African-Americans who lived near the school. A local refurbishing of an old mural also offered students a framework to understand their relationship to the community through art and local history. Since immigration is one of the themes covered in the fourth grade social studies curriculum, Laura Fradella

worked collaboratively with a fourth grade teacher and created a Wall of Honor mural with her class based on this topic.

Celebrating the Finish

Part of an educator's job is to teach students about accountability. Documentation recorded the progress of the mural project at all stages - with photographs, participants names, notes of surprises and problems that arose, keeping financial records, and writing a final report for the funders. The four 4' x 8' panels were painted in an art studio on campus. It was installed in the Rosenthal Library on the second level Reading Room followed by a dedication ceremony, attended by over 100 people celebrating the finished mural. It was the time when the participants 'gave' their work to the community. At the Procession dedication, there were speakers from the College, including the Provost, and Librarian, as well as, guest speakers from The

Queens Historical Society and The Langston Hughes Library and Cultural Center. This was followed by a musical interval performed by graduate music students and reflections by a member of the mural class who was an immigrant herself. A ribbon-cutting ceremony and refreshments followed closing remarks.

We created a work of public art that evolved from personal narratives of a cross-section of Queens's residents. Many of the stories started out with sad overtones, but ended quite positively. Murals present teachers with a way of working with students and communities to discover local history and reconstruct it through art for the public as well as for those who create it. I hope that this example of The Procession stimulates further discussion and understanding about the relationship between local history and art, for those interested in the challenges of art and social change.

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