

Mural Restoration Brightens Harlem

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The restoration of a 1986 Harlem mural was executed by (L to R) Jessica Guzman, Ariel Mercado, Alexandra Unthank, Maria Dominguez, Director Janet Braun-Reinitz, and Rochelle Shicoff. (Tim McDevitt/The Epoch Times)

NEW YORK—Last Saturday afternoon in Harlem

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was cool and brisk, but the newly restored mural “Homage to Seurat: La Grande Jatte in Harlem” brightened the day and warmed the hearts of those at a ribbon cutting ceremony.

New York artist Eva Cockcroft (1936–1999) originally painted the mural in 1986, and the ensuing 23 years had weathered the vibrant depiction of a sunny Sunday morning in Harlem, leaving the paint faded, flaking, and peeling from the wall of the apartment building on West 142nd St., where the mural overlooks the Hope Steven Garden, between Amsterdam Avenue and Hamilton Place.

The public mural, which is divided into two 30’x30’ sections, is based on the famous pointillist artist George Seurat’s signature work “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte,” painted in 1884. The original work by Seurat depicted a tranquil afternoon in the park as Parisians strolled in their Sunday finery. The pointillist method of painting, slowly layering thousands of “points” of paint that combine to create a harmonious work, was chosen as an inspiration by Cockcroft as a way to work with the heavily textured stucco wall on which the mural was painted.

Cockcroft used Seurat’s theme and method as a point of departure by setting the scene in Harlem as locals wear brightly colored Sunday finery on their way to church. From the left side of the painting a young bugler calls the characters

to worship, as other figures stroll hand in hand, walk their dog, or rest on the grass.

The heavy stucco on the building was cleverly incorporated in the design, taking into account the highly textured wall through the careful placement of a shoulder, a knee, and the many tree limbs and leaves that make up the majority of the painting.

New York City muralist Janet Braun-Reinitz, a colleague of Cockcroft, executed the restoration. Braun-Reinitz has painted over 50 murals in the United States and abroad. She worked with artists Rochelle Shicoff and Maria Dominguez and a team of three young internists—Alexandra Unthank from the Harlem Arts Alliance, Jessica Guzman from the Creative Arts Workshop, and Ariel Mercado from Children’s Art Carnival. The six women began the project on Aug. 22, but due to rain delays, the “sisterhood of the scaffold,” as they came to be known, had to make a non-stop push from Sept. 10 onward to complete the project on schedule.

“One of the great things about murals is that it doesn’t matter if anyone knows who painted it, but that people see the work everyday without having to go to a gallery. It’s free, and the artist knows that people are seeing their work,” said Braun-Reinitz.

Internist Jessica Gutzman echoed her remarks by saying, “As long as I live here I will see this everyday.”

Ginny Outlaw, who is a caretaker for the Hope Stevens Garden, said, “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.”

The project was sponsored by Rescue Public Murals, a national program based in Washington D.C., which joins art conservators with artists to ensure that community murals will survive for several more decades. Friends of Heritage Restoration also made the project possible, with further assistance from Golden Artist Colors, who donated all the paint used in the project.

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