

A Brief History of Rescue Public Murals (2006-2015)

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The advocacy and action group, Rescue Public Murals (RPM), was established in the mid-2000s with the goal of raising public awareness about the poor condition of public murals while documenting their artistic features and historic value. RPM sought to both inform the public about the condition, care, and needs of murals and identify murals that could be preserved. RPM offered recommendations on the arrangements and steps which needed to be taken to save these works of public art.¹ The effort which was an initiative of the national nonprofit organization Heritage Preservation² enabled artists, conservators, and interested parties to come together to work on public preservation projects.

RPM focused on five primary activities: assessment, restoration, best practices for mural creation, advocacy, and documentation. Through research, practice, and advocacy, RPM also sought to change the negative image that the public had of murals that had been left unpreserved.

The Rescue Public Murals initiative stemmed from “Modern Paints,” a 2002-2003 collaborative effort between the Getty Conservative Institute, the National Gallery of Art, and Tate Modern.³ Launched officially in December 2006 and put under the helm of Heritage Preservation, which had had success with a similar initiative, Save Outdoor Sculpture!⁴ RPM

¹ American Institute for Conservation and the Foundation for the Advancement in Conservation, Archive of Heritage Preservation Page “Rescue Public Murals,” <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/programs/heritage-preservation/rescue-public-murals>.

² Heritage Preservation was dissolved on June 30, 2015.

³ American Institute of Conservation and the Foundation for the Advancement in Conservation, “AIC Paintings Specialty Group Postprints,” 2009, 27 <https://www.culturalheritage.org/docs/default-source/publications/periodicals/paintings-group-postprints-volume-21-2008.pdf?sfvrsn=19>.

⁴ Ibid. Save Outdoor Sculpture! was a national initiative that originated in 1989 and was in operation through the mid-2010s, with the goal of documenting and preserving—through public-private partnerships—as many outdoor sculptures across the nation as possible. More about the project can be found here: <https://americanart.si.edu/research/inventories/outdoor-sculpture>.

launched a pilot phase ⁵ before going on to develop and disseminate best practices for mural painting, conduct assessments of murals, and advocate for treatment of endangered murals.⁶

RPM saw as its mission to “bring public attention to U.S. murals, document their unique artistic and historic contributions, and secure the expertise and support to save them.”⁷ The first stage of work drew attention to murals from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s which were in a deteriorated state due to age, environmental factors, and neglect. They bore only a slim resemblance to their original splendor and, as a result, their content and symbolism were obscured.⁸

The nationwide assessment program involved the examination and documentation of 16 murals at 10 different sites.⁹ The restoration process was intended to begin after the assessment was completed. RPM provided best practices for restoration, identifying techniques and materials that could best revitalize the murals.¹⁰ RPM also worked on advocacy, promoting the history and community value of murals so as to engage the public with these projects. With time, community members came to contact RPM about the restoration of specific murals. And it documented murals, saving digital images and other information about the murals that could be used for educational and professional projects.

The project was funded by the Getty Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Booth Heritage Foundation, Friends of Heritage Preservation, and the Wyeth Foundation for

⁵AIC Postprints, 27. RPM launched first with 10 communities as a pilot before the nationwide roll-out.

⁶ RPM was co-chaired by Dr. Timothy W. Drescher and Will Shank. An independent scholar who had been working on public murals since 1972, Drescher had been engaged as a consultant and lecturer on murals and their preservation. Co-chair Will Shank, head of conservation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, offered his expertise of the preservation field, especially on the topic of murals. See Cindy Casey, “Public Art and Architecture from Around the World,” April 2, 2013, <https://www.artandarchitecture-sf.com/tag/timothy-drescher> and AIC and FAIC, Archive of Heritage Preservation Page “Rescue Public Murals,” <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/programs/heritage-preservation/rescue-public-murals>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ AIC Postprints, 27.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

American Art,¹¹ with additional private-public partnership support within the communities where the murals resided.

The murals that RPM surveyed had been outdoors for decades subjected to the elements and the sun's ultraviolet rays. Daily wear and tear caused by people brushing up against murals or propping objects against them, as well as intentional damage like graffiti caused additional damage.

Individual scientists and conservators experimented and innovated treatments. Chemist Amanda Norbutus¹² is one of the scientists who developed treatments that utilized various compounds which could be used to cover the murals protecting them from some of the natural causes of destruction. Conservator Will Shank, one of the RPM co-chairs, proposed utilizing, "water-repellent products and ultraviolet radiation inhibitors to ensure greater durability of the paint layers, with a periodic reapplication every 7-10 years."¹³

Beyond the efforts of individuals, RPM initiated Mural Creation Best Practices,¹⁴ a program that offered recommendations on ways to care for and preserve public murals. The mural creation guidelines covered planning, wall selection, wall and surface preparation, painting, coating, and maintenance.¹⁵

Case Studies

¹¹AIC and FAIC, Archive of Heritage Preservation Page "Rescue Public Murals," <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/programs/heritage-preservation/rescue-public-murals>. In general, few details are available regarding the projects undertaken and funds contributed by private and/or public donations

¹² Amanda Norbutus, "Preserving Public Murals in Philadelphia," *Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA)*, March 12, 2014, <https://voca.network/blog/2014/03/12/preserving-public-murals/>

¹³ Will Shank, "Approaches to the Conservation of Contemporary Murals: Will Shank." *Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA)*, August 28, 2017, <https://voca.network/blog/2017/08/28/approaches-conservation-contemporary-murals-will-shank/>.

¹⁴Jenny Wiley Arena, "Heritage Preservation: Rescue Public Murals," *Just Paint*, February 1, 2014, <https://www.justpaint.org/heritage-preservation-rescue-public-murals/>.

¹⁵ The guidelines are available as a downloadable PDF at AIC and FAIC, Archive of Heritage Preservation Page "Rescue Public Murals," <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/programs/heritage-preservation/rescue-public-murals>.

When RPM began, its Co-Chairs and advisors identified nine murals across the United States that were considered “highly endangered”. These became the focus of the group’s efforts. Before discussing three of them at some length, it is worth mentioning the other six at-risk works.¹⁶

- *Under City Stone* (1972), by Caryl Yasko is located under a viaduct in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood. It is a product of its neighborhood as while creating it, the artist invited passersby to stop and pose for her. In 2008, the mural was assessed for the RPM project by mural conservators Elizabeth Kendall and Peter Shoenmann. When it was treated in 2015, Yasko invited the community to participate in the re-creation.¹⁷
- The *Song of Unity* was created in 1978 by the group of artists referred to as Commonarts— Anna DeLeon, Osha Neumann, Ray Patlán, and O'Brien Thiele—as a mixed-media construction at La Peña Cultural Center at Berkeley, California. After inspection and assessment in 2008 by ARG Conservation Services and the artists, a plan was developed to restore the mural. It is unclear if any work has been done to date.¹⁸
- *Multi-Cultural Progression* (1981), by Zara Kriegstein, located on the side of the Empire Builders Supply Company in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was assessed by the artist and

¹⁶ Although not a part of RPM though ultimately a victory in terms of mural rescue, *América Tropical* by David Alfaro Siqueiros demonstrates a significant and successful preservation process. Emblematic of the Mexican muralism movement in the US, the piece was created in Los Angeles in 1932 but was damaged over the years due to age, wear, and covering with paint. The Getty Conservation Institute took an active role in preserving the mural, supporting the mural’s maintenance since the 1980s. An \$8.95M public-private investment enabled the continuation of the preservation efforts, ultimately enabling the mural to be restored and re-revealed in 2012, 80 years after its creation. See Getty Conservation Institute, “Conservation of *América Tropical* (1988-2012), August 2019, http://www.getty.edu/conservation/our_projects/field_projects/siqueiros/.

¹⁷ Heritage Preservation, “Rescue Public Murals - Chicago Mural Nominated for Assessment,” viewable via Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130317103532/http://www.heritagepreservation.org/Update/2008/08spRPM.HTM>; on the restoration, see Kim Grimshaw Bolton, “Newly Restored ‘Under City Stone’ Mural Unveiled,” August 27, 2015, https://www.uchicago.edu/features/newly_restored_under_city_stone_mural_unveiled/.

¹⁸ Heritage Preservation, “Rescue Public Murals - Song of Unity,” viewable via Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101030124241/http://www.heritagepreservation.org/RPM/archive3.html>.

conservator Steven Prins in 2008. With the help of other specialists, they created a restoration plan for the mural. It is unclear if any work has been done to date.¹⁹

- The murals located at *Centro Cultural de la Raza* Balboa Park in San Diego encircle the 20-foot-high water tank that has been home to the organization since 1971. The first exterior mural was created in 1984 and many other murals followed. RPM provided an assessment of the murals in 2009 and concluded that there was deterioration and damage on a number of them. No work seems to have been undertaken to date.²⁰
- *SIDA en Colores /AIDS in Colors* (1988), by Carlos Callejo, was painted on the side of a produce shop in El Paso with the aim of correcting misconceptions about AIDS. Age, neglect, and wear as well as vandalism contributed to the mural's deterioration. An assessment of the mural was conducted by Steve Prins in 2007. The work does not appear to have been restored to date.²¹
- *Crossroads* (1997) was created by Carol Byard and Marilyn Lindstrom in collaboration with community artists from Minneapolis neighborhoods. RPM assessed the mural in 2008 so that a plan for its restoration could be created. It is unclear if any work has been done to date.²²

The three murals selected as case studies provide an overview of how the RPM handled murals from various geographic regions --East Coast, West Coast, and North Central--and the extent of its involvement in the preservation of these pieces.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Heritage Preservation, "Rescue Public Murals," viewable via Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110515203137/http://www.heritagepreservation.org/RPM/atrisk.html>.

²¹ Heritage Preservation, "Rescue Public Murals - National Group Takes First Steps to Save Anti-AIDS Art," viewable via Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101216162250/http://heritagepreservation.org/RPM/newsElPaso.html>.

²² Heritage Preservation, "Rescue Public Murals," viewable via Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110515203137/http://www.heritagepreservation.org/RPM/atrisk.html>.

Against Domestic Colonialism , by Arnold Belkin (1972), located in midtown Manhattan, New York City was a message against gentrification of the neighborhood, taking a stand against the big businesses and organizations which were buying up businesses and property and forcing out members of the community. According to the RPM website:

This is the only surviving mural in the United States by Mexican master Arnold Belkin, one of the most important 20th century muralists. It illustrates the struggle between communities and urban renewal programs, one of the most common mural themes for the first phase of the community mural movement (1965-73). Since its painting in 1972, the wall has suffered serious drainage and surface flaking problems, which continue unabated today. This mural was assessed in September 2011 through a partnership between Rescue Public Murals, the West 46th Street Block Association, CITYarts, Inc., and other concerned neighbors.²³



Figure 1: Arnold Belkin, *Against Domestic Colonialism*, mural in New York City, created 1972, photograph by Rosa Goldensohn, 2015, <https://viewing.nyc/media/0ef87386d6d800eddfc57f366dfe8385/>.



Figure 2: Arnold Belkin, *Against Domestic Colonialism*, mural in New York City, original rendering, 1972. [Artist on the project: Denise Penizzotto]
<https://denisepenizzottostudioarts.com/section/439894-https-en-wikipedia-org-wiki-Arnold-Belkin-Arnold-Belkin-Mural-Recreation.html>.

The mural overlooks a playground and is an important part of the community environment.²⁴

Over the years, the mural faded and became obstructed. In coordination with neighborhood associations and organizations, RPM arranged for an assessment of the mural.²⁵ Kristen Laise, Vice President for the Collections Care Programs for Heritage Preservation, evaluated the cost of repairs to be at least \$70,000.²⁶ As of 2011, local groups had raised half of the funds needed to do the work. A condition of all RPM initiatives was that mural preservation funds had to be

²⁴Akiva Blander, "Against Domestic Colonialism, a 1972 Anti-Gentrification Mural in Hell's Kitchen," *Viewing NYC*, August 1, 2015, <https://viewing.nyc/against-domestic-colonialism-a-1972-anti-gentrification-mural-in-hells-kitchen/>.

²⁵Boston.com, "Endangered Mural in NYC Could Be Restored," September 19, 2011, http://archive.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2011/09/19/endangered_arnold_belkin_mural_against_domestic_colonialism_in_new_york_city_could_be_restored/.

²⁶Ibid.

raised through private-public partnerships.²⁷ The paint needed to refinish the mural matched to the colors originally used in 1972 was donated by Mark Golden and Golden Paint.²⁸ More recently, artist Denise Penizzotto joined the project and will lead the preservation work. The goal for 2020 is to resurface the wall and begin the painting process, demonstrating that in some cases the work of Rescue Public Murals has continued even though the organization has ceased to exist.²⁹

The second mural case study is *All of Mankind: The Unity of the Human Race* (1971-1973) in Chicago, created by William Walker, a prominent artist and muralist during the 1960s-1980s who was the lead artist on *Wall of Respect*, the 1967 mural that gave birth to the community mural movement in the city. *All of Mankind* is a series of murals located on both the interior and exterior of Strangers Home Missionary Baptist Church. The cycle of murals is referred to as Chicago's "little Sistine Chapel" due to their narrative depiction of desperation and horror as well as hope and salvation.

The interior murals, which were painted over by the congregation in 2004, depicted African American family love and togetherness. The 40-foot-high exterior mural questions hatred, the horrors of war, and the struggle for civil rights.³⁰ The pressing need for preserving this work was stated on the Rescue Public Murals website:

All of Mankind is one of the few remaining outdoor murals of William Walker, a primary artist behind the Wall of Respect (1967) the mural that began the community mural movement. It covers the interior and exterior of the Strangers Home Missionary Baptist Church near the former Cabrini-Green housing project.

²⁷ Ibid. In addition, a website was created by those in the community to raise funds for the restoration. See Mathews-Palmer Playground Mural Arts Program, "About," <http://www.mathews-palmer-playground-mural-arts-program.com/the-mural>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Chicago Public Art Group, "Save the *All of Mankind* Mural," 2008, <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/all-of-mankind>.

In the past thirty years, the colors have faded and the surface has been abraded; the building itself is also threatened by redevelopment.³¹



Figure 3: William Walker, *All of Mankind* (exterior), mural in Chicago, 1973, <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/all-of-mankind>.



³¹ AIC and FAIC, Archive of Heritage Preservation Page “Rescue Public Murals,” <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-us/foundation/programs/heritage-preservation/rescue-public-murals>.

Figure 4: William Walker, *All of Mankind* (exterior, detail), mural in Chicago, 1973, <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/all-of-mankind>.

The mural held historical and symbolic meaning for those in the area. In speaking of the work, Jon Pounds, Executive Director of Chicago Public Art Group stated, “The church itself represents the successive century-long service of three religious denominations as the community evolved from mainly Italian-American to African-American families. Bill Walker’s mural, *All of Mankind*, stands as a tribute to the tumultuous times in which it was painted and continues to provide a particularly relevant message for all of us today. This is a powerful piece of Chicago public art deserving of preservation.”³² In 2007, the mural was documented by the Chicago Public Art Group and recommendations were put forth for the preservation of the mural. Unfortunately, the Public Art Group was not able to fund the project or secure ownership of the mural. When a buyer for the church was announced, the group and community were given a brief period of time in which to buy the church or to move the exterior mural. Plans for restoration and/or relocation were unsuccessful. In 2015, the mural was painted over.³³

A third case study of RPM’s efforts is *Innocence* (1975), by Norma Montoya a mural in Los Angeles, California. The mural is located in the Estrada Courts along with 53 other murals. These murals are an important part of the community. *Innocence* was one of three murals selected to be assessed and preserved under the NEA Access to Artistic Excellence grant of

³² Ibid.

³³ Deanna Isaacs, “Obliteration of *All of Mankind* Points to a Problem with Privately Owned ‘Public’ Art,” *Chicago Reader*, December 23, 2015, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/all-mankind-bill-walker-cabrini-green-art/Content?oid=20572925>. For more on Walker, see Jeff W. Huebner, *Walls of Prophecy and Protest: William Walker and the Roots of a Revolutionary Public Art Movement*, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

\$35,000 which RPM was awarded in 2006.³⁴ The assessments took place in May and June 2007.³⁵



Figure 5: Norma Montoya, *Innocence*, mural in Los Angeles, 1975, <http://muralsmakeadifference.weebly.com/innocence.html>.

At this time, little information can be found about the mural's current condition, the state of the proposal to repair the work, or the status of the preservation effort.

Although active for less than a decade, Rescue Public Murals alerted the U.S. public to the deterioration of murals across the country and the need for these important bearers of culture, history, and sense of place to be “rescued” through documentation, assessment, and (ultimately) conservation treatment. RPM provided individuals and communities with guidelines for bringing these works of art back to their original state.

³⁴ National Endowment for the Arts, “Heritage Preservation,” <https://www.arts.gov/article/heritage-preservation-washington-dc>.

³⁵ American Institute for Conservation. “Rescue Public Murals.”

Although RPM dissolved in 2005 at the same time as its parent organization, Heritage Preservation, RPM formed a partnership with *ARTstor*, a digital image repository to make available 700 RPM images in addition to the 5,000+ images of murals contributed by RPM Co-Chair Timothy Drescher,³⁶ and other mural initiatives have followed which seek to fulfill similar goals.

³⁶ To view the Rescue Public Murals: (FAIC) collection of more than 500 images, see <https://www.artstor.org/collection/rescue-public-murals/>. To view the collection of more than 5,800 images in the Timothy Drescher: Community Murals collection, see <https://library-artstor-org/category/1034324885>.