

## **Will Shank** **On Heritage Preservation**

When I came back to the USA after half a year at the American Academy in Rome in 2005, I had a portfolio full of ideas under my arm. The Booth Family Rome Prize in Conservation had afforded me the luxury of time to concentrate on research about the state of public and private policies worldwide about the conservation of contemporary murals. The interest was there, at least on the left side of the Atlantic, we had learned as early as 2003, when, thanks to the support of the Getty Conservation Institute and the Getty Research Institute, an international group of professionals came together to consider the question of “The Mural in the Americas” at a two-day symposium in Los Angeles. For the first time, the creators of American community murals felt that their efforts, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, had been validated at a high level.

Co-conspirator Tim Drescher, an imminent scholar and author of important volumes on community murals, worked with me to figure out the next steps. At that moment in 2006, we were very fortunate to attract the attention of Larry Reger, executive director of Heritage Preservation. His organization was willing to take on our initiative, still unnamed, as a program.

I had come to know Larry in the 1980s and 90s during my tenure at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and I had grown to admire, if not to completely understand, the special kind of alchemy that he and the NIC (which subsequently became Heritage Preservation) worked in the halls of power in Washington.

It took more than a wave of his wand to get Rescue Public Murals up and running, and enthusiastic support came also from a group of professional advisors, among them many of my preservation-based colleagues, as well as scholars of contemporary social and art history, and quite a few paint-spattered artists with buckets of paint in their hands. Basing RPM on the successful example of the SOS! (Save Outdoor Sculpture) program, Tim and I, with the support of our advisors, led the HP staff through the vagaries of mural world; they “got it” and became an invaluable and trusted resource for our efforts. Moira Egan, Kristen Laise and the hard working support staff of Heritage Preservation carefully and patiently molded our ideas into an organization that had a direction, a lot of energy, the capacity to attract serious funding—from the NEA, the Getty Grant Program, Friends of Heritage Preservation, the Wyeth Foundation and others--and the ability to legitimize the efforts of the often-overlooked

work of America's community muralists, both great and small. We are particularly proud of having developed a model for surveying and treating community murals that includes those living and working with them on a daily basis. We are very proud of what we accomplished in a few short years, and we hope that our example shines for others facing similar preservation challenges.

All good things come to an end, and so did Heritage Preservation, much to the sadness of those of us who had assembled the wide-flung elements of Rescue Public Murals into a cohesive whole. And yet the work that we accomplished, particularly our Best Practices advice for muralists, continue to live on the web page of the A.I.C., giving continuity to the years of work that we accomplished at Heritage Preservation. If I haven't thanked him enough, thank you, Larry Reger!