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TOP STORY

'A Day in America': Work donated to OCFAC by Philadelphia mosaic artist in 2002 has inspired many

JOHN MACK T&D Staff Writer Jun 11, 2016



A nine-panel work of art by Isaiah Zagar has been on display at the Orangeburg County Fine Arts Center since the artist permanently donated it to the center in 2002.

The piece, *A Day in America*, describes America through an arrangement of various ceramics, figures and seemingly useless objects, proving the old adage that “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

Beth Thomas, executive director of the Fine Arts Center, says the piece contains “all found items that are American in origin or that you would find in America.”

Zagar, a Philadelphia mosaic artist, chooses to tile on alleyways, old walls and even townhouses to beautify the area and visually transform the city.

“The reason we have this, in 2002, we had a mosaic exhibit,” Thomas said. “We had it to celebrate the Society of American Mosaic Artists.”

The nationwide association was founded here in Orangeburg and was the first American society for mosaic artists. The Society of American Mosaic Artists was founded in 1998 by members Janet Kozachek, Allison Way Hank, Jeri Burdick, Sonia King, Connie Wannamaker and Sven Warner.

The event attracted artists from multiple states and countries including Austria, Scotland, Israel, and even Zagar himself. He had been traveling the U.S. for three years and would take the piece with him to different museums and art galleries, leaving it on display for two to three months at a time.

“He would stack it in the back of his car,” Thomas said.

The nine-panel piece was intended to be displayed as a 3-foot by 3-foot square.

“It would not fit on the wall here that way,” Thomas said. “So he spread it out and thought it looked so good, he decided to donate it.”

In return, local mosaic artists and SAMA founders Jeri Burdick and Janet Kozachek created a mosaic for Zagar representing South Carolina and sent it to him to display in his studio.

In the mosaic, images representing the state were included, such as the yellow jasmine, the Carolina wren, mountains of South Carolina and the Palmetto tree.

“It was very symbolic of South Carolina,” Thomas said.

In 2009, when Cliff Emery first arrived in Orangeburg to lend his services to the center, he felt a certain familiarity with the piece.

“I asked Beth a little while later and she said it was done by this Philadelphia artist,” Emery said.

In a turn of events that Emery could only describe as serendipitous, he had come in contact with Zagar years before during his time in Philadelphia.

“Of course! I have been in his house and studio,” he told Thomas.

“I’d actually been in Philadelphia walking down the street, and there was this gentleman with a beard sitting outside with a little sign that said take a tour for five bucks,” he said.

Emery described Zagar’s home as having every inch covered in found items.

He says he doesn’t have just one favorite part of *A Day in America*. “I love the whole thing from start to finish.”

With renovations scheduled to begin later this year at the OCFAC, it will be a challenge finding a new spot for the mosaic to be displayed, Emery said.

“It’s got to stay,” he said. “Whether it’s upstairs, downstairs — we don’t know how we’re going to do it but we’re going to have to do it.”

“This has inspired so many people,” Thomas said. “They come here and look at it and say, ‘I can do that. It’d be fun.’”

The Orangeburg County Fine Arts Center looks to motivate both young and established artists. The center will offer summer art classes June 20-23, Jun 27-30, July 11-14 and July 18-21, with supplies included.

For more information, visit the center’s website at www.ocfac.net or call 803-536-4074.

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