

COMMUNITY MURALS

The People's Art

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Philadelphia

Here the principal office coordinating street murals has been the Department of Urban Outreach, later called Community Programs, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Headed by David Katzive when it began doing murals in 1971, it came under the direction of Penny [unclear] neighborhood

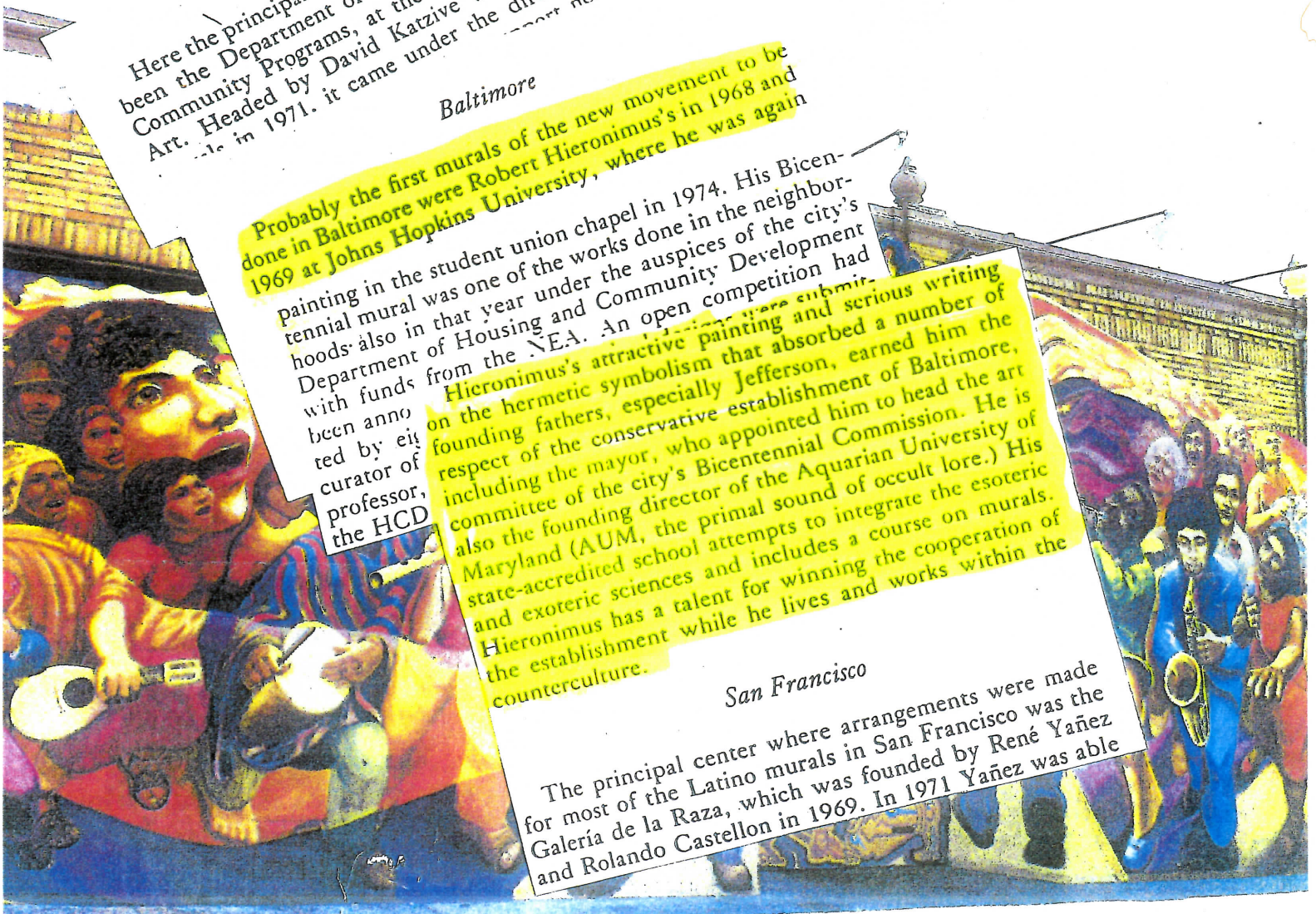
Baltimore

Probably the first murals of the new movement to be done in Baltimore were Robert Hieronimus's in 1968 and 1969 at Johns Hopkins University, where he was again

painting in the student union chapel in 1974. His Bicentennial mural was one of the works done in the neighborhoods also in that year under the auspices of the city's Department of Housing and Community Development with funds from the NEA. An open competition had been announced by eight founding fathers, especially Jefferson, earned him the respect of the conservative establishment of Baltimore, including the mayor, who appointed him to head the committee of the city's Bicentennial Commission. He is also the founding director of the Aquarian University of Maryland (AUM, the primal sound of occult lore.) His state-accredited school attempts to integrate the esoteric and exoteric sciences and includes a course on murals. Hieronimus has a talent for winning the cooperation of the establishment while he lives and works within the counterculture.

San Francisco

The principal center where arrangements were made for most of the Latino murals in San Francisco was the Galería de la Raza, which was founded by René Yañez and Rolando Castellon in 1969. In 1971 Yañez was able



Spassky, sports figures, penology with Reagan, Pro-cunier [former director of the California Department of Corrections] and a gun tower with a chained but walking George Jackson, Hitler and just about everything including the string bikini and a streaker.³⁷

The mural is a great montage of images that are borrowed from magazine and newspaper photos and clearly captioned. Coggeshall's experience demonstrates, if it needed demonstrating, that prisoners are at the mercy of their keepers, and that different keepers will feel threatened by different things. He pushed on the system as hard as he dared and found where it would give and where it offered resistance.

In other instances prisoners have decorated their dining halls with pleasant pastoral landscapes, which it is difficult for someone on the outside to criticize because they are not political. What can be concluded from these examples is that if a professional muralist does want to help prisoners do murals, he must do it on their terms, which is not different from his accountability to neighborhoods on the outside. It is not unlikely that he may find himself caught between the convicts and the authorities, and this he must be prepared to deal with, for by then he has acquired responsibilities to the prisoners.

Visionary Murals

While many muralists were seeking in their ethnic culture resources for community development, others were pursuing a transformation of personal and collective life through occult wisdom and its symbolism. In widely separated places around the country and with hardly any knowledge of one another, these painters of different racial backgrounds employed a rich vocabulary of esoteric imagery to communicate their understanding of social and even political change. Already Gary Rickson in Boston in 1968 utilized a great cosmological eye that was weeping because of human violence. The following year he employed surrealistic and "metaphysical" imagery in his *Africa Is the Beginning*. Rickson was able to keep his symbols within the understanding of a popular audience at the same time as he conveyed with cryptic elegance the impression of great spiritual forces. In 1974 he with young assistants returned to the symbol of the weeping eye in a mural overlooking an outdoor neighborhood theater in the South End. We have also observed that much Chicano art has a strong visionary element in it. The idea of Aztlán itself, with its dream of a new civilization growing out of the past, has lent itself to visionary presentation like Guillermo Aranda's mural of 1974 at the Centro Cultural in San Diego. There a beautiful Chicana flees from a mechanized monster across a rainbow to an incarnation of a new Aztec culture with a pyramid crowned by eagles. The vision is seen through a transparent globe held in a pair of enormous

hands, but the pyramid projects behind the globe, suggesting that it is more than an apparition. In many other Chicano murals the evocation of *indio* culture in a modern setting had a visionary aspect.

But in Baltimore Bob Hieronimus developed an altogether different approach out of esoteric, official American and modern Pop imagery. A White artist, he completed in a Black neighborhood in 1974 a mural dedicated to the Bicentennial in which he utilized the symbols of the nation's Great Seal—the monoptic eye in a pyramid, Lady Columbia, the eagle, stars, and wreath—and combined them with figures of Aquarius, a great comet, the ship of state bearing the heraldry of Baltimore and Maryland, a UFO, and the Yellow Submarine moored to the top of the city's Battle Monument, which is a memorial to its defenders against the British in 1814. Hieronimus says his mural urges a "cultural regeneration" that would fulfill the city and country's potentialities. He succeeded in pulling these images together in a work whose beauty and force are immediate. Although the symbols are familiar and the uninitiated can make headway with them, Hieronimus wrote an attractively illustrated guide for those who want to pursue their more recondite meaning. The acceptance by local Black people of his painting was demonstrated when I was photographing it five years after it was done. A young voice came down from a window high in a building behind my back: "Don't you take no picture of our picture."

In 1975 Hieronimus did a twelve-by-ninety-foot mural for Baltimore's Lexington Market, which dates back to the founding of the nation. Therefore, he took as his main image a long banquet table set with meats, fruits, and cheeses to which America's great have come to celebrate its two-hundredth birthday. All the personalities have local associations; the roster extends from Washington to Francis Scott Key, Edgar Allan Poe to Martin Luther King, Jr., and modern jazz and big band performers. Over them the Great Seal's providential eye and pyramid, along with Virgo, the astrological sign of service, preside. Soyuz noses up to Apollo and a new Peaceable Kingdom of colorful beasts (each of whom, we are told in a brochure, has symbolic meaning) envelops a portrait of modern Baltimore. At very least the mural is entertainingly designed and vibrant in color.

It is in Los Angeles that the greatest number of esoteric murals have been done, undoubtedly because the city has been the home of cults for decades. They have often been associated with the exotic tastes of Hollywood and sun worshippers but also with the fact that California since the nineteenth century has been the home of a wide variety of utopian experiments, often of a religious nature. The local occult murals owe their origin to the revival of this tradition, particularly by the counterculture. The most famous and controversial was the *Beverly Hills Siddhartha* by the Los Angeles Fine Art Squad, but it will be discussed later. Murals of the Age of Aquarius adorned Los Angeles cabarets and restaurants, health