

MV VISUAL ARTS COMMITTEE HISTORY—Jonathan Clark, 2024

The Mountain View Visual Arts Committee was established by the City Council in 1989. Our formerly sleepy town was undergoing rapid change and its coffers were replete with funds generated by developer fees and especially by San Francisco's garbage which lies here under our feet.

1. [Mission Statement] Every city program begins with a Mission Statement of course, and the VAC was no exception. The program was funded through a city requirement that one percent of the budget of any major public works project be set aside for art. An initial Capital Improvement Project allocation of \$100,000 was made to the Committee to fund events and public activities, as well as the purchase of major artworks. Private developers were not subject to fees but were encouraged to include publicly-accessible art in their projects through incentives like square-footage increases.

Five community members (later expanded to seven) were appointed to advise the Council on selecting art for purchase, and engaging the public through arts and art-related events. The first chairman was Roy Minor, whom some of you may remember as a tireless community volunteer, and the program was initially overseen by Ken Alsman, Economic Development Director. In Alsman's words, "The city program has worked because it is designed to be as simple as possible. Artwork for private developments is not required, not regulated, and not reviewed. But we've ended up with a lot of wonderful artwork."

2. 1993 PROJECTS

After educating itself about other cities' public art programs, considering a long list of projects, and formulating an arts program tailored to Mountain View, the Committee conducted a citizen's art survey, sponsored community events like a sand castle sculpture competition on Castro Street, and published an illustrated City public art inventory.

3. 4. 5. [Plaza Art 92, three slides]

We then embarked on our first major project, the Plaza Art Public Sculpture competition and exhibition, selecting 22 artists out of a pool of 130 applicants from across California, many of them prominent in their field. The sculptures, some very large, were placed throughout Pioneer Park and the City Hall Plaza. The artists transported and installed their own pieces, with the assistance of city crews. The works were on view for six months, and at the conclusion several artists opted to donate their pieces rather than carry them home. It was amazing to see Pioneer Park and the Plaza transformed into a vibrant sculpture garden, and the exhibition received rave reviews from the public and the press. Visitors were asked to fill out comment cards, which we considered during the selection of four sculptures for purchase, including--

6. IBIS by Elizabeth MacQueen; and

7. BOY AND GIRL AT PLAY IN THE CALLA LILY FIELD by JoeSam.

8. 9. 10. 11. 12. QUILTS GALLERY

The following year, a major project was the conversion of unfinished fourth-floor space in City Hall into a temporary art gallery, done in part with VAC volunteer labor and donated materials. The first exhibition was an International Quilt Exhibit, with 40 art quilts made by 27 artists, along with

[13. ATRIUM] other quilts hung throughout City Hall, loaned by the Leone-Nii Gallery. Incidentally, the stained glass in City Hall was also selected by the VAC. The Gallery saw continuous use for several years, including the very popular City Employee art exhibits, until it was reclaimed by the city, regrettably, for office space.

14. 15. WAR MEMORIAL

In 1993 we worked with the MVHA and the American Legion to install a War Memorial plaque in the City Hall Plaza, engraved by a stonecutter in Berkeley.

Other activities in 1993 included art selection for the Shoreline Golf Clubhouse, several exhibitions in the Performing Arts Center lobby, and design of a small park and sculptural fountain next to Fire Station #1.

16. 1994 PROJECTS

By 1994 the Committee was in high gear, with the help of two additional members. We sponsored several shows in the Performing Arts Center space including two exhibits from schools, and a large photography show. We selected a sculpture by JoeSam for the new Whisman Sports Center. And we produced four major exhibitions:

17. 18. PLAZA ART 94

Plaza Art 94, curated by sculptor Dan Dykes, featured 18 sculptures in mediums ranging from stainless steel and bronze to marble and hammered copper, including a monumental forty-foot long piece in the center median of Castro Street. A “Philosopher’s Bench” by John deMarchi invited visitors to rest in the Plaza’s center, while Bruce Johnson’s massive Family rose from Pioneer Park. Following a well-attended public reception for the artists, the pieces were on view for six months.

19. ART QUILT INTERNATIONAL/FIBER EXPRESSIONS

Based on the popularity of the previous art quilt show, we co-sponsored this edition, along with a companion exhibition of Fiber Arts.

20. JAMES QUILT

With a combination of donated funds and CIP money, the city purchased the art quilt by highly regarded artist Michael James which still hangs prominently in the atrium of City Hall.

21. FERLINGHETTI

In April 1994 we opened a show of paintings by my friend Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the celebrated San Francisco poet and owner of City Lights Books, in honor of his 75th birthday. The show brought wide attention in the press and several hundred people attended the opening reception, where Lawrence gave a talk about his work and the beat generation era.

22. I designed a poster for the show and brought copies for anyone who would like to take one after the program.

23. CHRONICLE ARTICLE

By 1995 Mountain View’s innovative and engaging public art program was the envy of other communities. Our success gained wide attention as shown by this article from the San Francisco Chronicle. I believe the key to this success was adopting an approach that involved the community at large and offered visually enriching experiences, rather than simply buying and installing artworks that often evoke responses like “We spent money on THAT?”

24. 25. 26. 27. HOW YOU CAN HELP

Early on, the committee offered this guide to supporting public art. It makes clear that the program represents an investment by the city for the entire community.

28. LATC ARTICLE

Of course we now live in a different time. Aesthetic Studies majors such as myself are a minority in the population. The city is dominated by corporations such as the one hosting us today, and developers with no interest or investment in building community. Back in the 90s, private developers and companies were enthusiastic partners in our public art ventures. This news article from last week’s Town Crier illustrates the antagonism of real-estate interests towards “parks fees, transportation impact fees, fees for general government services, and public art fees”. I feel fortunate and grateful that I had the opportunity to be part of what in retrospect seems like a golden age of community art.

RELOCATING THE CHASE BANK MILLARD SHEETS ARTWORK

29. SHEETS MOSAIC

The Chase Bank building at the intersection of El Camino Real and Castro Street, originally Home Savings and Loan, was initially proposed in 1975, the year I bought my home in Mountain View. The building was designed and ornamented by artist Millard Sheets and associates, as part of the savings bank empire founded by Howard Ahmanson. This remarkable collaboration between artist and financier resulted in over 160 buildings throughout California and other states, decorated by the Sheets studio and widely acknowledged today as landmarks of art created for public enjoyment, funded by private enterprise.

The story of California artist Millard Sheets and his evolution from plein-air watercolorist to design studio impresario is well documented. The collaboration with Home Savings began in 1954, and by the early 1970s the Sheets studio was creating what is regarded as their finest work.¹ Their signature mosaic murals were individually researched for each location to reflect local history, and this is particularly true for the Mountain View building. While the project was under review by the City Council, Millard Sheets personally attended meetings and offered modifications based on suggestions from planning director Glen Gentry, who wanted a building “as historically valid as it certainly will be attractive.”² The unique architectural design, with its hand-crafted brick masonry and Richardsonian arches, sets it apart from typical Home Savings buildings. The mosaic itself, while incorporating some standard themes, was specifically adapted to reflect Mountain View’s particular historical development.

30. HERTEL MURAL

Besides the mosaic, the building contains a large interior painted mural and stained-glass roundel. All three features were designed by a woman artist, Susan Lautmann Hertel, principal collaborator (and former student) of Sheets and eventual president of Millard Sheets Design, Inc. The mural bears her signature, and her initials can be discerned at the lower right edge of the mosaic. A large percentage of works associated with the Sheets studio were created by this remarkable artist, initially done under the supervision of Sheets but often in a style recognizably her own.

Many former Home Savings buildings have been demolished or re-purposed and their art elements defaced or destroyed. This represents a sad and often unnecessary loss of a unique historical and artistic legacy. There has never been another project quite like the Sheets/Ahmanson collaboration, nor has the breadth of their artistic endeavor been duplicated. While removal and relocation of these complex artworks might appear at first a daunting task, its feasibility has been demonstrated numerous times at other locations with complete success.

The current proposal to demolish the Chase Bank building seems inevitable. Yet the potential relocation of the Sheets studio artwork offers a unique opportunity to preserve and even enhance our community’s enjoyment of this resource. Lacking the context of the original building, there is no rationale for keeping the art on the original site. I am offering herein some alternative locations that will place the works prominently in the public eye and add value to Mountain View’s enviable public art collection.

31. SVENSON SCULPTURE

32, 33. PROPOSED MOSAIC LOCATION, MV PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

MOSAIC: This ideal location is well lit, in full sun without shadows for much of the day. The mural is placed high on the wall and viewed from a distance, as originally intended. The contrast with JoeSam's playful sculpture (an early acquisition by the Visual Arts Committee) gives a wonderful effect.

34, 35. PROPOSED STAINED GLASS RONDEL LOCATION, MV LIBRARY

STAINED GLASS RONDEL: This seemingly little-used alcove in the Children's Section accommodates the window perfectly without modification. Gentle LED lighting would adjust according to ambient light. The seating area opposite creates a quiet space to sit and enjoy the artist's peaceful vision of children and horses. The wall currently holds temporary fabric sculptures.