

How public art gets lost - and saved - in Philly

JANUARY 8, 2016

by **Samantha Melamed**

For fans of public art in Philadelphia, it still stings to think about that day in 1998 when word got out that an iconic wall sculpture by artist Ellsworth Kelly had been removed from the old Greyhound office building, quietly sold, and given to New York's Museum of Modern Art.



It wasn't the first or last great work of public art to be lost to Philadelphia through some combination of intercity poaching, heedless development, and neglect. In fact, even as the Gallery mall closed for renovations Jan. 1, the fate of its public art remained unclear. The same

goes for other works that have languished in storage, with limited money for preservation.

Still, losing the work by Kelly, who died Dec. 27, wasn't entirely a bad thing, said Penny Balkin Bach, executive director of the **Association for Public Art**, a nonprofit that commissions, preserves, and promotes works in the city.

"The removal of the Kelly was this sort of slap-in-the-face wake-up call that we needed as a city and as a cultural community to pay more attention to these kinds of things," she said. Her organization has become more proactive since, as have art fans. "Having the public's eyes and ears alert is probably our greatest protection."

Now, scrap yards call her when they come across bronze sculptures they suspect have been stolen, and New York gallery owners tip her off when important works come up for sale.

"In Philadelphia, a lot of public art is in private hands," noted Susan Miller Davis, an art consultant and former director of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority's Percent for Art Program. "Things can be lost, but also people can mobilize and succeed."

Some works, commissioned through Percent for Art mandates, are legally protected. For others, it's a matter of having enough time and money to come up with a solution. That's how Philadelphia hung on to *LOVE* in the 1970s. The Robert Indiana work was here on loan before city art commissioner Fitz Eugene Dixon Jr. bought it for its loving public. Individuals, institutions, and foundations have stepped up for other works since - including, last year, the steel tree *Symbiosis* by artist Roxy Paine on the parkway.

Here are some works Philly has lost, others it has saved, and still others whose fate is uncertain. Overall, Bach said, we're winning more than we're losing: "Philadelphia is probably in a better position than almost any city in the country to protect its public artworks - if we know what's happening."

In limbo

Long neglected, the tiled mural **Philadelphia Now and Then** by Larry Rivers on the basement floor of the Gallery has confounded preservationists for more than a decade. Davis tried to find a new home for it in the

early 2000s but could not. Today, as work begins on the Gallery, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority is still tangling with logistics, but a home has been identified, said Julia Guerrero, director of the authority's Percent for Art Program. She's also preparing to announce new sites for other works affected by the renovations: **Harold Kimmelman's Burst of Joy**, an explosion of polished aluminum at Ninth and Market Streets, and **David Lee Brown's Amity** at 10th and Market. A third sculpture, **Nizette Brennan's The Bathers**, has been in storage since 1998.

A collection of **Alexander Calder banners**, commissioned for the atrium of Centre Square, were put in storage and long thought lost. But a decade ago, they were found and briefly installed at the Free Library before disappearing from public view. "The building has changed hands again, and there are discussions about a new extremely public and appropriate location," Davis said. Guerrero said an announcement was likely this spring.

Red Grooms' Philadelphia Cornucopia, installed at the Institute of Contemporary Art and then 30th Street Station before moldering in storage for years, was given to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2010, hopefully to be restored. It has been in storage since.

Harry Bertoia's bronze fountain, Free Interpretation of Plant Forms, for what was once the Civic Center in West Philadelphia, has been in storage for years. But the city recently issued a request for proposals for the restoration of the sculpture, with hopes of moving it to the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill.

Robert Indiana's AMOR arrived on loan ahead of the papal visit in September. Art fans have noticed it seems awfully at home on the Art Museum terrace. "People now are saying, 'We love this sculpture. Can we keep it?' " Bach said. "That will very much have to do with whether private donors step forward. It's very similar to what happened with the *LOVE* sculpture in 1976. So it comes full circle."

Saved

Shoved into a corner near City Hall, **Jean Dubuffet's Milord La Chamarre** once held a place of honor in the atrium of Centre Square. "When the building changed hands in the 1980s, the new owners decided to shop the sculpture around in New York," Bach said. Word got out, and the Redevelopment Authority got an injunction to stop the sale. The current site was a compromise. "It's not an ideal position," she said, "but, on the other hand, the piece did not leave Philadelphia."

In 1998, The Inquirer reported the planned sale of **The Dream Garden, a Maxfield Parrish and Louis Comfort Tiffany mosaic mural** at the Curtis Center. Activists sprung into action. "What was invoked really for the first time was declaring it a historic object according to Philadelphia code," Bach said. The Pew Charitable Trusts then bought the piece for PAFA.

In 1998, a Wal-Mart heiress almost succeeded in buying perhaps the greatest painting to come out of Philadelphia: **Thomas Eakins' The Gross Clinic**. The Art Museum and PAFA raised \$68 million to buy the work from Thomas Jefferson University.

A New York gallery first alerted Philadelphia public-art advocates to the attempts to sell **Augustus Saint-Gaudens' marble Angel of Purity** by St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. It was saved in 2005 by a last-minute purchase by the Museum of Art.

Lost

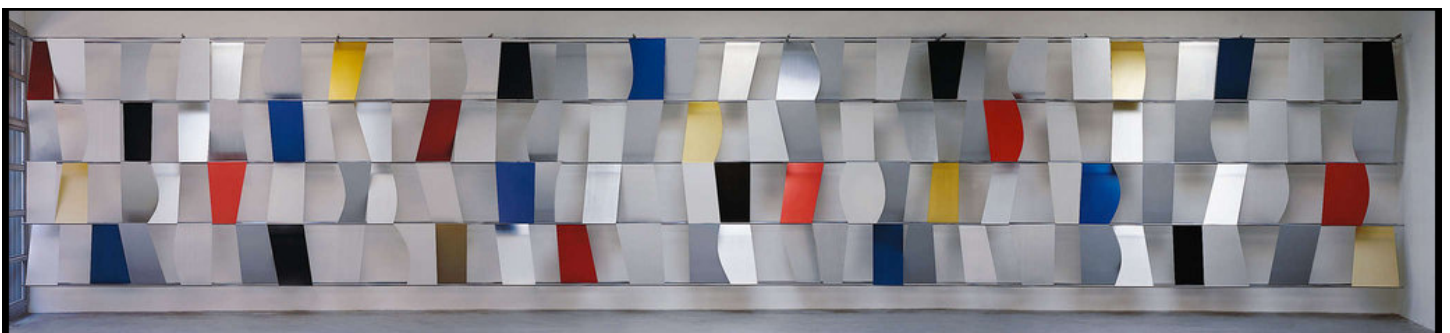
(... and saved): Out of a trio of sculptures by three artists for the old Civic Center, only one has survived in the city collection. **Air, a Walker Hancock sculpture**, was restored and installed in the summer at Schuylkill

Banks Park, at a cost of about \$40,000. According to city public art director Margot Berg, one of the companion pieces, **Water**, was returned to the artist, and **Earth** remains in storage, likely never to return to public view. "If the cost to restore and install exceeds the work's value," she said, "that's kind of the measure of what to do with something."

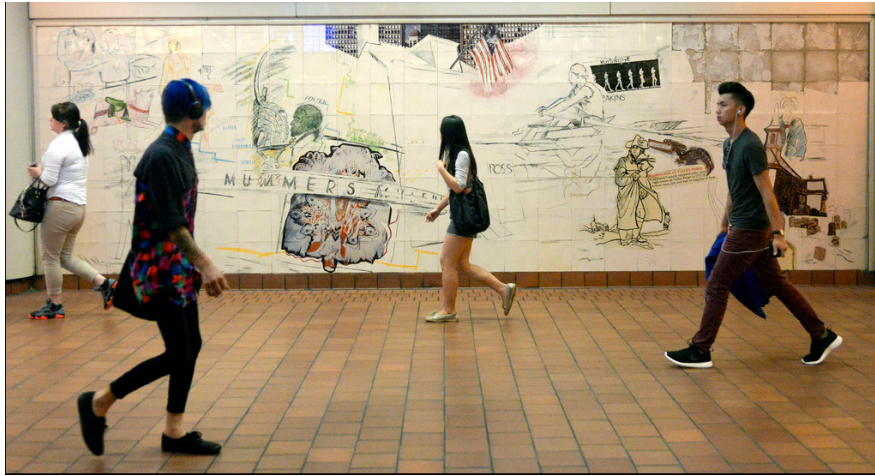
Sculptor **Joseph Greenberg Jr.** was dismayed when his sculpture for the Bell Atlantic Building, **Heroic Figure of Man**, was donated by a new owner to the Fairmount Park Commission. According to Bach, the artist said the work was not designed for a park setting and asked that it be scrapped.



Harold Kimmelman's "Burst of Joy" must be moved from the Gallery.



"Sculpture for a Large Wall" (1956-57) by Ellsworth Kelly was removed in 1998 from the old Greyhound building, quietly sold, and given to New York's Museum of Modern Art. "The removal of the Kelly was this sort of slap-in-the-face wake-up call," said the head of a public art nonprofit.



At the Gallery, now closed for renovations, is "Philadelphia Now and Then," the 75-foot-long tile mural by Larry Rivers. A home has been found for the work, says the city Redevelopment Authority. BEN MIKESELL / Staff



"The Dream Garden" (1914), by Maxfield Parrish and Louis Comfort Tiffany, at the Curtis Center, was rescued by activists from being sold in 1998. Pew Charitable Trusts bought it for PAFA. CHARLES FOX / Staff



"Philadelphia Cornucopia" (1982) by Red Grooms, installed at ICA and then 30th Street Station, was given to PAFA in 1010. It is in storage.



Banners by Alexander Calder in Centre Square atrium in 1976.



"Free Interpretations of Plant Forms" (1967) by Harry Bertoia.



"Angel of Purity" by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, saved in 2005.



"Milord la Chamarre" (1973) by Jean Dubuffet.



"The Gross Clinic" by Thomas Eakins was almost lost in 1998.



"AMOR" sculpture by Robert Indiana, on loan for papal visit.