

MUD MAKING MAGIC

“The Seasons”: Metuchen’s community mural

Some say that Public Art is the most dynamic form of art being made today. It automatically reaches a vast audience on a regular basis. Well-planned, it can enliven the area and become a genuine source of pride for a community.



Linda Vonderschmidt-LaStella assists young and older community members, creating handcrafted clay objects for “The Seasons” mural in Metuchen, New Jersey. Photos from the artist.

The four-year, multi-panel public art project undertaken by the small Central New Jersey community of Metuchen (pop. 13,000) is a perfect example. Five years ago the Metuchen Arts Council seized on the opportunity to invite local ceramic artist **Linda Vonderschmidt-LaStella**, a ceramic sculptor who creates large-scale ceramic murals, to lead the creation of a public art project, transforming a bland cinder-block storage building into an arts destination.

More than 300 people took advantage of getting their hands in clay to create their own original part of the mural.

Two primary ideas shaped Vonderschmidt-LaStella’s planning of the project: one, that from a distance, each panel needed to ‘read’ as something organic and beautiful; and two, that as many members of the community as possible would be invited to add their own creative elements. The artist recognized that it would be imperative for her to maintain a great deal of control of both the design and final glazing to make that happen.

Hence, Vonderschmidt-LaStella created a whole different approach to the creation of a large mural from what she uses when designing and fabricating one as a solo artist. Very specific design work and a ‘map’ of every individual tile and its shape needed to be created at the outset. Each individual tile had to be cut, numbered and wrapped in preparation for the community art sessions, which took place only on March weekends, both Saturday and Sunday, over the span of four years.

Those sessions were such fun! Taking place at the Metuchen Senior Center, a large, bright, airy room with easy access to places for clean up and immediate storage of the finished tiles, those sessions brought together individuals, families, generations, Girl Scout Troops, neighbors, and friends, all interested to “make their mark on Metuchen!” Since it was an Arts Council project, members of the Metuchen Arts Council volunteered each session as “Studio Assistants” to answer questions, assist, gather materials and tools, set up and clean up.

For some growing families, it became a March ritual to create their tile, and many parents

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could proudly point to 3-year olds who had attended all four sessions!

So while the overall flow of the image was created by the artist, all who came to work on the mural could uniquely sculpt their own tile, and while each panel had its seasonal theme, each individual artist was free to impress and sculpt whatever he or she wished.

During the creation of the “Winter” panel, the project had the additional assistance of two Metuchen high school students as part of a mentoring program that inserted students into areas of professional interest within the larger community. Those two students were a great asset to the program, working along all the steps of the process, through not only the school year, but over the summer as well. They assisted with slabbing and cutting the tiles, with the community art sessions, loading and unloading multiple kilns, wrapping the tiles for transport, and even kiln care.

The lead artist not only identified the panel with its seasonal name but included in the design space to showcase how the town celebrated that season in a communal way: the Junebug ArtFest and outdoor movies in *Summer*, scarecrows on Main, gallery openings in *Autumn*, the Holiday Parade and House Tour in *Winter*. A pink pussy cap was slung impetuously over the edge of a sign since *Spring* was completed in 2017, a reminder that the town had sent 30 buses of marchers to DC earlier that year for the Women’s March.

The men from the Metuchen Department of Public Works were integral to the process, giving the building a new roof, new flashing, adding landscaping to protect the lower tiles, and finally repairing and painting the metal door. But even more directly, they prepped the walls to receive the tile and, with lots of assistance from the community, did the actual installation.

A festive dedication brought the making phase of the project to completion. However, the life of the murals continues to unfold as it is now a destination for walks on sunny days, for “drive-bys” with out-of-town relatives, and for all those who had a hand in the project or who are genuinely delighted that such color and artistry has arisen in town.



“The Seasons”: *Winter and Spring*



“The Seasons”: *Summer and Fall*