

Folk Art Finder

November 25, 1986

Seymour Rosen, Director
SPACES
1804 N. Van Ness
Los Angeles, CA 90028

Dear Seymour:

Enclosed is a copy of an AP article on Holy Land USA from the Hartford Courant and a letter to the editor I wrote in response.

As you no doubt know, Holy Land USA is a highly regarded environment folk art work, the only one in the state of Connecticut.

A fundraising drive is underway to restore the damage done by vandals over two years ago. However, I was alarmed to read that the plans call for tearing down "ramshackle shrines", everything that is "unsightly" and only what is aesthetically pleasing will remain. (In the judgment of Sister Bulla)

Knowing your expertise in matters such as this, I am hoping you can put the weight of your organization behind a strong letter written to the good Sister Angela Bulla supporting the restoration of Holy Land USA as close to the original as possible.

Julie and I had a fine time being squired around LA by you. We were sorry that we missed the symposium in Cleveland, but one of these fine days I'm sure our paths will cross again.

Meanwhile, best wishes and we're delighted to see your newsletters coming with regularity.

Sincerely,

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Address of Angela Bulla is Catholic Campaigners for Christ, Holy Land USA, 60 Slocum St., Waterbury, CT 06706.

Sincerely,

Florence Laffal
Editor

*We'd welcome any
other suggestions.*

Folk Art Finder

November 24, 1986

Letters to the Editor
The Courant
285 Broad St.
Hartford, CT 06115

It was with considerable concern that I read the Associated Press article in the Sunday November 9 Courant headlined "Lack of Money Leaves Holy Land USA Decaying on Waterbury Hilltop."

John Greco, a Yale Law School graduate, began building Holy Land USA atop Pine Hill in Waterbury over 40 years ago. A devout man, Greco hoped his depictions of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the Catacombs, and a myriad of other religious and ecumenical works, would "bring people closer to God." His dreams were realized in part, as, during Greco's life, Holy Land USA attracted tourists by the thousands.

Not only religious groups came. Everyone seemed to enjoy the lilliputian biblical depictions set into the hill. Artists and art historians were especially drawn to the site because Holy Land USA was a remarkable piece of environment folk art.

But three years ago vandals destroyed some of the religious figures and, for the first time in its existence, Holy Land was forced to close for repairs. John Greco died last year at the age of 90 and Holy Land became the property of the Catholic Campaigners for Christ, a non-profit group that Greco founded. There has been considerable difficulty raising money for repairs, but according to the Courant article there is now a drive on to raise two million dollars. Without that, the place will remain closed.

The Courant article quotes Sister Angela Bulla, provincial for the Religious Teachers of Filipini, a teaching order of nuns (two of whom live on the grounds and oversee Holy Land) as saying that the current plans call for tearing down many of the "ramshackle shrines", everything that is "unsightly or no longer serves a purpose". She goes on to say that "what is aesthetically pleasing we'll keep. What is not, we'll remove." And finally Bulla says, "There was always something chaotic about Holy Land's design."

As an artist and editor of a newsletter on folk art "Folk Art Finder," I am appalled that someone should be making a judgment on what is to remain on the hill and what is to be torn down. My translation of the above paragraph is that all of John Greco's work which was made of odds and ends of found material falls into the category of "ramshackle shrines", "unsightly", and surely a bit "chaotic". But it is these works that give Holy Land its artistic validity and charm. John Greco never refused a gift for his hill, and there are some commercial, saccharin works among the rough, authentic pieces. It sounds like the grand plan is to replace the "unsightly" handmade Greco works and change the whole character of the site.

Holy Land USA is widely recognized as a unique visionary folk art environmental work, a major contribution to our national heritage. In a comprehensive article, "Holy Land USA" in the Summer, 1979 issue of the Clarion (magazine of the Museum of American Folk Art), art historian Allan I. Ludwig writes, "This site (Holy Land) must take its place alongside other such naive and visionary projects as Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles and S.P. Dinsmore's Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas." (Watts Towers, also created by an Italian immigrant, was saved from demolition only because of public outcry, and is now undergoing a substantial restoration.)

In many European countries and in two states of the USA there are laws protecting art works from destruction or defacement. But, unfortunately, Connecticut has no such laws. The only hope is that other voices will join mine in urging the Catholic Crusaders for Christ to restore and preserve this unique piece of environmental art - the only one in the entire state of Connecticut - as close as possible to the original creation by John Greco.

Florence Laffal, Editor