

Salvation Mountain--A Heavenly Hazard or End of the Rainbow?

The famous Italian Renaissance artist Michaelangelo spent five years of backbreaking labor with his helpers painting the Sistine Chapel in the heart of Rome, and created one of the world's greatest and most celebrated monuments to the glory of God. Visitors from all over the world flock to see it every day.

Self-taught artist Leonard Knight spent nine years working alone to make another monument to the glory of God, almost as big as the Sistine Chapel, but chose to locate it in a remote desert area near Niland, California, where it has remained one of the most isolated and remote creative acts in the nation. Few people outside the immediate community have seen it, and the chances are getting slimmer that others ever will. For now Imperial County Supervisor Brad Luckey wants to tear it down.

Though Michaelangelo was trained by master artists when still a boy, while Leonard Knight was well past fifty when he began making art, their work shares more than just a dedication to God and a willingness to think big. Both liked to work with materials that some would consider hazardous.

It is a very good thing that Michaelangelo didn't create his religious masterpieces in Imperial County, or his work would have come under even more attack than Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain. One can just imagine the scene: Michaelangelo finally finishes the Sistine Chapel ceiling and up steps the Renaissance equivalent of the County Supervisor to scrape off a few samples.

What might the Supervisor have found? Plenty of things to make him worry: lead carbonate and lead hydrate, mercuric sulphide, lead tetroxide, sulphide of arsenic, copper carbonates, cobalt arsenide, lead antimoniate, lead monoxide, copper acetate, lead and tin oxides, and carbon black (a cancer-causing Renaissance, and many have been in use since "Bronze" times.

That 16th century County Supervisor would have said, "That Chapel's got to go. It's a health hazard," and the Renaissance version of the County Board of Supervisors Chairman would have chimed in, "Yes, the answer is automatic." Since bulldozers and dump trucks hadn't been invented yet (Michaelangelo's rival Leonardo Da Vinci probably had them under consideration, though, since he was already working on a helicopter) a few weeks later the pick and shovel fellows would have shown up to rip down the whole Chapel and cart it to a dump.

Instead, wiser heads in the Vatican prevailed, and it is a good thing, too. For four hundred years millions of visitors have paid entrance fees for the privilege at a landmark of human accomplishment. Those fees did a lot more than just pay for the upkeep, too.

All the art museums of the world are filled with objects that could be considered health hazards. The glow of Venetian paintings is due to compounds of mercury, sulfur, and arsenic. The pale yellows of 17th century Dutch painters are oxides of lead. Peter Paul Rubens used cobalt pigments and English landscape painter John Constable used oxides of chromium.

Leonardo da Vinci loved to work with lead monoxide to achieve a particular golden shade. Compounds of copper and arsenic form the emerald greens of many Impressionist paintings, while those warm browns of painters like Rembrandt were sometimes made from the ground-up dried remains of mummies smuggled out of Egypt. The fact is, that art is meant to be seen--but not eaten.

Paint samples revealing traces of lead at Salvation Mountain should have come as no surprise, since Leonard Knight has freely admitted using exterior grade paints at the site. However, samples taken from the yellow paint on taxicabs and bulldozers, and from the yellow stripes on highways would yield very similar results. Yellow lead chromate is the primary pigment in highway paint. Yet one can't imagine Brad Luckey arguing that therefore all the highways in Imperial County should be scraped up and taken to a toxic waste dump (along with the dozers themselves!), despite the fact that far more local citizens are exposed to these "hazards."

Dozens of other communities faced with dealing with unusual creative acts like Mr. Knight's Salvation Mountain have taken much more imaginative steps toward solving their dilemmas, and have succeeded in turning most of them from potential problems into triumphs. A postman named Jeff McKissack spent 25 years building a monumental work of handmade architecture in Houston's low-rent East End district called "The Orange Show." Decorated with found objects, The Orange Show illustrated McKissack's philosophy of good health and nutrition. After McKissack died the city considered tearing it down, but local citizens saved it--and today it serves as a cultural center and source of civic pride. The Orange Show has a library and a gift shop, sponsors events like parties and parades, is a major stop-off point for bus tours, and has served as a focal point for the economic improvement of the whole area. And the local county supervisors there are only too happy to claim credit for the boom.

In the equally low-rent Watts section of Los Angeles, an uneducated sanitation worker named Simon Rodia spent years building the now world-famous Watts Towers. Again, the city tried to tear the work down, but the Towers almost miraculously withstood the demolition crew--and now the Towers have a community center and park at their base, and hundreds of thousands of visitors come from all over the globe to see them.

Lucas, Kansas, is the home of the "Garden of Eden," built by S.P. Dinsmoor, and thousands of visitors pay admission each year to walk through the one-acre site. Undoubtedly a soil test would reveal traces of toxic substances, but no one has suggested getting rid of this religious monument despite the fact that it is in the middle of a settled neighborhood (unlike Salvation Mountain). The Garden of Eden's gift shop is too good for the local economy.

Thousands of visitors pay to see Edward Leedskalnin's "Coral Castle" near Miami--another unusual monumental work built by a lone individual. Local people work as guides and run the gift shop at the site.

The "Corn Palace" at Mitchell, South Dakota, the "Ave Maria Grotto" in Cullman, Alabama, the vast concrete (lead painted, no doubt) "Garden of Nek

Chand" at Chandrigah in India, and the "Ideal Palace" in Hautrives, France--these were all products of individual imaginations and energies as great as Leonard Knight's, and all have become sources of pride for their towns. Funds generated by admissions have paid for maintenance, while providing a few more local jobs. What's more, all have proven that by publicizing instead of destroying works like these, tourists can be encouraged to travel to even the most remote areas and pay to see something amazing. If anything, Salvation Mountain is certainly amazing!

By thinking positively instead of destructively, perhaps the Imperial County Supervisors can find a way not only to spare one man's act of religious devotion, but to turn it into a benefit instead. In any case, they should hesitate long and think hard before ruining something that took Leonard Knight so long to make. They just might be sparing the goose right before it lays its first golden egg.

Roger Manley, August 17, 1994

Roger Manley is a photographer, folklorist, curator, and writer, with areas of interest ranging from outsider artists and tribal peoples to fairy tales and gardens. His book **Signs and Wonders: Outsider Art Inside North Carolina**, presents the art work of more than a hundred outsider artists from North Carolina. He is the co-author of several other books including **Hoaxes, Humbugs, and Spectacles**, **Walks to the Paradise Garden**, and **Dear Mr. Ripley** (a book about Ripley's "Believe It Or Not!"). He has collaborated with Tom Patterson on books about Georgia's eccentric artists St. EOM and Howard Finster, as well as with Reynolds Price on a book of stories.

Currently he is a screenwriter for a PBS educational TV fairy tale film series called "*From the Brothers Grimm*," and the guest curator of upcoming exhibits at NC State University (the lifework of outsider artist Annie Hooper, which will open in the spring of 1995) and at Baltimore's new American Visionary Art Museum (*Tree of Life*, opening summer 1995).