

Patriotic art

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By Ruth Rovner



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this mosaic. Titled "We The People," it was installed at the end of April and is now on permanent display. Mandell has created artworks on wide-ranging subjects, but never before on the subject of government and the Constitution.

"The Constitution really speaks to the best of what our country offers," says Mandell, who was a history major at Northwestern University before doing graduate work in fine arts.

It was his idea to create such a mosaic, and he was delighted when the National Constitution Center commissioned it. The project was financed by a grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

The Center takes pride in this unique work by a prominent mosaic artist. "The National Constitution Center is honored to display Jonathan Mandell's beautiful artistic tribute to the Constitution and the freedoms it protects," said the Center President and CEO Joseph M. Torsella.

Mandell's mosaic features separate images that highlight various aspects of democracy: For instance, one panel shows jurors seated in the jury box. Another depicts a swearing-in ceremony for a naturalized citizen. Other panels show a voter in a voting booth, a soldier, and a group of citizens staging a protest.

Then, too, there are panels depicting historical figures who advanced these rights even further. The most well known is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Another panel shows the Seneca leader Osceola. "He stood up for the rights of Native Americans and was very bold and determined," says Mandell.

Legal rights are the focus of the panel depicting Clarence Gideon. When he was accused of theft in the early 1960s, he couldn't afford legal counsel. His petition went all the way to the Supreme Court, and his efforts won the right of legal representation for all those who cannot afford it.

"I wanted to show the rights and responsibilities given by the Constitution, plus individual people who expanded the process," says Mandell.

Not every visitor will recognize figures such as Chief Osceola or Clarence Gideon, so the Center is preparing an explanatory plaque with details about each panel.

To choose the subjects for his mosaic, Mandell used his knowledge of American history and did additional research. He also worked closely with Dr. Steven Frank, the Center's historian. "He was of enormous help," says the artist. "I gave him my raw concepts, and he made very specific suggestions as we refined the ideas."

Inside the National Constitution Center, visitors can view over 100 exhibits, photos, documents, interactive displays and other artifacts that tell the story of the U.S. Constitution from Revolutionary times to the present. Now, there's a new addition: a work of art dedicated to the Constitution and its meaning. It's a 10-by-6-foot mosaic created from numerous semi-precious stones and minerals, and every detail relates to some aspect of the Constitution.

Artist Jonathan Mandell of Bala Cynwyd created

The lower half of the mosaic emphasizes the theme of democracy in another way. At the bottom are the words of the Preamble to the Constitution, starting with the famous opening: "We the people." Above it are depictions of the three branches of government: the Congress, the White House, and the Supreme Court. Mandell purposely set a mirror behind these images. "In this way, people can see themselves reflected in the government," he explains.

Once he decided on his themes, Mandell worked on the actual mosaic. Every image in the 12 panels is ingeniously created from semi-precious stones and minerals. For instance, the Statue of Liberty is made of iridescent glass. The protesters hold signs made from yellow opalite, zebra marble, agate and leopardskin jasper. In the swearing-in ceremony, the blue of the flag is made with blue quartz.

In all, Mandell used about 25 different stones and minerals, as well as ceramic tile. Working in his Bala Cynwyd studio, he chose pieces from his own extensive collection. "I'm a pack rat," he says. "I find material and hold on to it."

Mandell even collects pieces of broken glass. To do this, he visits the "hot shops" where glass is blown to create vases and other objects. He buys the broken shards of glass that are being discarded, and then uses them in his mosaics. For instance, in the jury scene, two of the juror's neckties are made of glass shards.

It took Mandell 10 weeks of intensive work to complete the mosaic in his studio. Then came the challenge of installing it in its new home: Delegates' Hall on the first floor of the Constitution Center. The mosaic was carefully crated and trucked over to the Center, where it was attached to the wall using strips of wood that locked it into place.

"Everything went pretty smoothly," says Mandell, who admits he was "sweating it out" during the installation process. Then came the high point: seeing the finished work in the place where it was meant to be. "It's amazing to see the realization of your ideas," says the artist. "And it always looks its best in the place where it's installed."

Mandell's mosaics can be seen in many places besides the National Constitution Center. One surprising venue is Citizens Bank Park. Mandell was one of four artists commissioned to create art for the new ballpark when it opened. His 8-by-6-foot art mosaic, installed in the main concourse, is a portrait of the ballpark itself. The varied images include the clock tower, hot dog vendors, the scoreboards, the fans, and, of course, the players. It's all done with semi-precious stones and minerals, as well as ceramic tile, glass and metal.

Another ambitious mosaic is on display at the Hillel House of the University of Pennsylvania: a timeline of the history of the Jewish people. Still other Mandell mosaics are on display at the National Liberty Museum, Delaware Valley College and the National Museum of American Jewish history.

His mosaics are on permanent display in New York in the McGraw Hill Publishing Company collection, and at public sites in Boston, Las Vegas and elsewhere.

The Bala Cynwyd artist has been applying fine arts principles to mosaic art since 1990, when he earned his MFA degree from the Graduate School of Fine Arts of the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in sculpture.

An Egyptian artist friend, Selim ElSherif, introduced him to mosaic art. "For me, it was the perfect fusion of sculpture, painting and drawing," he says. "It all came together with mosaics."

That's been his focus ever since.

Now his most ambitious creation is on permanent display at the National Constitution Center. "It's always gratifying to see your work in a public venue," he says. "And this is one of the city's premier institutions. It's a real honor to be associated with the National Constitution Center."

For more information about mosaic artist Jonathan Mandell, visit his Web site at www.jonathanmandell.com, where the body of his work is on display.