

## **The Artistic Evolution of the *Wall of Respect***

In his 1967 poem, *The Wall*, Don Lee/Haki Madhubuti described the *Wall of Respect* as "...a black creation / black art, of the people, / for the people, / art for people's sake / black people / the mighty black wall ...." This essay describes how the *Wall of Respect* evolved to meet different definitions of "art for people's sake" from 1967-1971.

### **The Origin of an Idea, Spring and Summer 1967**

The *Wall of Respect* was the result of both collective action and individual inspiration. In the spring of 1967 a group of artists formed the multi-disciplinary Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC). Many of OBAC's members were college graduates or art students who wanted to involve their art in the collective political struggles of the era. They established a visual arts workshop headed by artist Jeff Donaldson with the goal of producing a significant collective artwork. But it was the slightly older mural painter Bill Walker who introduced the idea of painting a public work of art on the corner of 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Langley Avenue.

Walker had been planning on painting a mural by himself that would address the neighborhood's impoverished condition and upon joining OBAC he presented the idea to the group. The other artists responded with enthusiasm to the general idea; however, they cooperatively decided that the project should involve everyone in the Visual Arts Workshop and focus on the more optimistic theme of "Black Heroes." As Donaldson pointed out, the very act of making public portraits of black heroes was a radical undertaking during an era when advertisements and school textbooks rarely featured African Americans and the mainstream media rarely reported positive stories about the black community.

The OBAC artists wanted to create a unified visual statement of the Visual Arts Workshop, so instead of allowing community members to contribute directly to the *Wall*, they drew up a list of figures that was modified and approved by the community. For instance, former gang member turned community activist Herbert Colbert insisted that the more militant Stokely Carmichael, rather than Martin Luther King, be included on the *Wall*.

### **Designing the *Wall*, July and August 1967**

The process of designing and painting the *Wall* was also a cooperative endeavor. Walker, who had spent more time in the neighborhood than the other artists, served as a community liaison, getting approval and donations of paint from local businesses located at 43<sup>rd</sup> and Langley. Meanwhile, each of the artists submitted a design scheme for the *Wall*. Sylvia Abernathy, a student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, presented the most effective proposal by dividing the *Wall* into seven thematic sections determined by the building's doors, windows, and moldings. Norman Parish, a School of the Art Institute student at the time, recalls choosing the section about Statesmen from Abernathy's design and conducting extensive library research to select the appropriate portraits for the figures in his section. He also included a brilliant red-orange diagonal streak to symbolize the violence implied by the famous Malcolm X quote "by any means necessary."

While the artists were attentive to the details of their individual sections, they maintained the overall order and symmetry of Abernathy's design. Some figures were ingeniously "framed" within windows, and the entire composition was focused on Myrna Weaver's portrait of Muhammad Ali triumphantly raising his fists. The sections on the first story were generally darker and more saturated in color than the sections on the second story. And, in between the two stories, OBAC photographers hung a row of their

work, just above eye level. As a dividing line between the two stories, this row of photographs contributed not only to their respective sections but also to the design of the overall composition.

### **The Break-Up of OBAC, September 1967**

The *Wall* began to receive significant national exposure even before its completion, drawing viewers from all over the country to stop by and visit the work-in-progress. On August 27, 1967, there was a rally to celebrate the completion of the *Wall*. Soon thereafter, several members of the group, including Bill Walker and Myrna Weaver, whitewashed Parish's Statesmen Section of the *Wall*. According to Parish, his section did have some problems—his portrait of Malcolm X was not finished and suffered because the paint was not adhering to the mortar between the bricks. Nonetheless, he and many other OBAC artists were distraught to find his section whitewashed without the full consent of the group. They were further distraught by media coverage of the *Wall* that portrayed it as the product of local community activists and amateur artists rather than crediting OBAC. The FBI caused further dissension within the group by sending false threats from fictional gangs and sending agents to monitor the artists' activities at the mural site.

### **Changes to the Original Design, Fall 1967**

In September, as OBAC splintered and many of its members began to relocate and leave the mural behind, Walker and Weaver invited an outside artist, Eugene Eda, to re-paint the whitewashed Statesmen Section. Veering from Abernathy's original design, Eda painted the section black, affixed a painting of Malcolm X to the *Wall*, and painted an upraised fist among the portraits of Carmichael and Brown. That fall, Walker also repainted his Religion Section. Originally, it contained portraits of Nat Turner, Wyatt

Walker, and Elijah Muhammad. However, because Malcolm X had left the Nation of Islam under hostile terms, Walker was asked by the Nation of Islam to paint over Elijah Muhammad, who did not want to be on the same wall as his former protégé. In his place, Walker painted a fictional scene of Nat Turner preaching before a crowd holding signs that read “See, Listen, Learn.”

### **A Significant Change in Theme, 1968-1969**

Further changes to the site at 43<sup>rd</sup> and Langley substantially altered the *Wall of Respect*. The mural began to relate more directly to its local community with the addition of a local heroes section, including a portrait of Herbert Colbert by William Hancock. In addition to depicting black heroes it also began to include significant social commentary about contemporary issues. In early 1969, Walker and Eda painted the *Wall of Truth* across the street from the *Wall of Respect*. If the OBAC *Wall of Respect* was impressive for its optimism, thoughtful integration of political and cultural heroes, and subtle but unified design, the *Wall of Truth* was impressive for its breadth of style, up-to-the-minute subject matter, and ambivalent depiction of race relations in America. In a section of the *Wall of Truth* called “Black Laws” the artists regularly pasted up newspaper clippings about contemporary events in the Black Power Movement and occasions of police brutality that testified to the divisiveness of the era.

Walker similarly wanted to update the *Wall of Respect* so he encouraged Eda to paint over his Statesmen section with something more contemporary. Eda responded by boarding up his earlier image and painting over it with a depiction of a Klansmen, a lynching, and a scene of police brutality that he had seen on the evening news. Fitting for such inflammatory subject matter, the color scheme was red-orange. At the same time, Walker repainted his section of the *Wall* with an image he called “Peace and Salvation.” It depicts the faces of black and white racists glaring at one another within a

circle stretched open by black, white, yellow, and red hands. The image represents Walker's belief that, in order to force a public conversation about racism, Americans of all colors need to unite.

### **Long-Term Influence of the *Wall of Respect***

Because of the national media coverage that the *Wall of Respect* received, it attracted the attention of artists and community activists in other cities. Original *Wall of Respect* artists Walker, Eda, Elliot Hunter, and Edward Christmas were invited by a group of ministers in 1968 to paint the *Wall of Dignity* and several other murals in Detroit. Soon Walls of Respect, as black pride murals came to be known, were painted in Boston, St. Louis, and Philadelphia.

The *Wall of Respect* also attracted the attention of white, Latino/a and Asian American artists who began to paint similar murals in their neighborhoods. In 1970, Walker and muralist John Weber formed the multiracial Chicago Mural Group, which included such prominent artists as Mitchell Caton, Caryl Yasko, Astrid Fuller, and Ray Patlan. In 1972, Mark Rogovin, a student of Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, founded the Public Art Workshop in Chicago.

Walker, Eda, Weber, and Rogovin drew further attention to the Community Mural Movement when they were invited to paint and show their work in the lobby of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 1971. Because the muralists feared being co-opted by such a mainstream museum environment, they prepared a manifesto declaring the public's ownership of the walls created by the mural movement. This same spirit of public stewardship continues to inform the Community Mural Movement to this day.

During the MCA show, a fire damaged the *Wall of Respect*, which was quickly demolished by the City to make way for a community center. Yet, despite various

changes to the original mural and its demolition, the *Wall of Respect* continues to exert a tremendous influence on the development of “art for people’s sake.”

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