

# NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT

## PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

### PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

#### 1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: 230-36 Vine Street, 238 Vine Street, 255 Bodine Street, 237 New Street, Philadelphia PA

Postal code: 19106

Councilmanic District: 1

#### 2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Painted Bride Art Center

Common Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

#### 4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☒ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Performance space and gallery

#### 5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a plot plan and written description of the boundary.

See attached.

#### 6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a description of the historic resource and supplement with current photographs.

See attached.

#### 7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1981 to Present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: Built c. 1950, mosaic added to exterior facade 1991

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: \_\_\_\_\_

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Isaiah Zagar, Artist

Original owner: \_\_\_\_\_

Other significant persons: Painted Bride Art Center

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- ☐ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- ☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☐ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- ☐ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- ☒ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☒ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- ☐ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- ☒ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- ☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- ☒ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Please attach a bibliography.

**9. NOMINATOR**

Name with Title Emily Smith, Executive Director,  
Philadelphia's Magic Gardens Email esmith@phillymagicgardens.org

Organization Philadelphia's Magic Gardens Date \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address 1020 South Street Telephone 215-733-0390

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia PA 19147

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: December 4, 2017

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: March 16, 2018

Date of Notice Issuance: \_\_\_\_\_

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Painted Bride Art Center Inc.

Address: 230-36 Vine Street

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19106-1213

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

## **5. Boundary Description**

### **PREMISES "A"**

All that certain lot or piece of ground with the buildings and improvements thereon erected.

Situate in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward of the City of Philadelphia and described according to a survey and plan thereof made by Ben H. Joseph, Esquire, Surveyor and Regulator of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Survey District of the City of Philadelphia on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of June A.D., 1950, (Plan verified correct 2/28/1981) as follows, to wit:

Beginning at a point on the southerly side of Vine Street at the distance of one hundred seventeen feet eastwardly from the easterly side of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street; thence extending eastwardly along the said southerly side of Vine Street seventy-four feet, five inches to a point; thence extending southwardly on a line parallel with the said 3<sup>rd</sup> Street seventy-four feet to a point; thence extending eastwardly on a line parallel with the said Vine Street ten inches to a point; thence extending southwardly on a line parallel with the said 3<sup>rd</sup> Street seventy-five feet, two and one-fourth inches to a point on the northerly side of New Street; thence westwardly along said side of New Street seventy-five feet, three inches to a point, which point is at the distance of seventeen feet eastwardly from the easterly side of Bodine Street (ten feet wide) but not on City Plan; thence extending northwardly on a line parallel with the said 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, one hundred forty-nine feet, one and three-eighths inches to the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

Being Nos. 230-36 Vine Street.

### **PREMISES "B"**

Also all that certain lot or piece of ground.

Situate on the northerly side of New Street and the easterly side of Bodine Street, between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

Containing in front or breadth on the said New Street seventeen feet and extending of that width, northwardly between parallel lines at right angles to said New Street, sixty feet to a point.

Being No. 237 New Street.

### **PREMISES "C"**

All that certain lot or piece of ground with the message or tenement thereon erected.

Situate on the south side of Vine Street between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets and being on the southeast corner of Vine Street and Bodine Street in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

Containing in front or breadth on said Vine Street seventeen feet and extending of that width in length or depth southward seventy-five feet.

Bounded eastward by ground now or late of Israel Pemberton, southward by ground now or late of Philip Hoelkel, westward by a certain ten feet wide alley leading from said Vine Street to New (formerly Elm) Street and northward by Vine Street, aforesaid.

Being No. 238 Vine Street.

PREMISES "D"

All that certain lot or piece of ground with the message or tenement thereon erected.

Situate on the easterly side of Bodine Street at the distance of sixty feet northwardly from the northeast corner of Bodine and New Streets in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

Containing in front or breadth on said Bodine Street fifteen feet and extending of that width in length or depth eastwardly between parallel lines with New Street seventeen feet.

Being No. 255 North Bodine Street.

Office of Property Assessment Account Number: 771746000



## **6. Building Description**

The building at 230-236 Vine Street is a 1-story, 5-bay, vernacular building. Originally constructed c. 1950 as a garage with a masonry façade, the building has been adaptively reused as a performance space and art gallery since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The building is notable for its vibrant mosaic façade (created by Isaiah Zagar 1991-1993) that encompasses the north, south, and west elevations from sidewalk to terra cotta cap, with imagery and lettering composed of colorful ceramic, glass, and grout.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1:** 230-236 Vine Street, present day.

Although 230-236 Vine Street is within the boundaries of the Old City Historic District, the building is considered a non-contributing resource to the historic district.



**Figure 2:** 230-236 Vine Street, 1974

<sup>1</sup> 1942 Philadelphia Land Use Map (WPA) shows 230-36 Vine Street as a vacant lot. 1962 Land Use Map (WPA) shows a garage has been constructed on the site.

<sup>2</sup> Ron Avery. "Don't Paint, Zagarize." *Philadelphia Daily News*. 17 September 1993. "The prototype of Zagar's grand dream for Philadelphia can be found on the walls of the Painted Bride on Vine Street near 3<sup>rd</sup>, especially the side wall on Bodine Street and the rear wall on New Street. It has taken Zagar two years, lots of his own cash and the occasional help of about 50 others to complete what might be the most eccentric, colorful wall mural on planet Earth."



## North Elevation

The primary, north elevation faces Vine Street and has a shaped parapet with terra cotta cap. The north wall is clad with mosaic, composed of ceramic and glass elements with colored grout. The north elevation that runs adjacent to the sidewalk along Vine Street has three window openings with 4-light aluminum windows with brick sills. A set of concrete steps with an iron railing leads to single-leaf steel door with a single-light wood transom. The former garage door opening is now a 10-light aluminum storefront with double-leaf glazed aluminum doors. Incorporated into the north elevation's mosaic is script that reads, "*The Bride Has Many Suitors, Even.*"



**Figure 3:** North elevation

A section of the north facade is set back from the sidewalk on the west side of the building and features a 5-light aluminum storefront with double-leaf glazed aluminum doors. Above the doorway are the words, "*La Novia Pintada*" and "*Painted Bride.*"



**Figure 4:** North elevation (façade set back from Vine Street street, serves as building's public entrance).

## West Elevation

The west elevation faces Bodine Street and is clad with mosaic, composed of ceramic and glass elements with colored grout and a terra cotta cap. The west side of the building has minimal openings. There is a single-leaf glazed aluminum door on the recessed wall of the west elevation and one window opening with 6-light aluminum window on the elevation that is adjacent to Bodine Street.

This elevation has the words “*Painted Bride Arts Center*” near the roof. The text “*Painted Bride*” is again written on this wall and a brief history of the organization composed in tile: “*In 1970 the Painted Bride opened in an old wedding dress shop on South Street 1984 the Bride moved to a permanent residence 230 Vine Street.*”



**Figure 5:** West elevation, set back from Bodine Street.



**Figure 6:** West elevation, wall adjacent to Bodine Street.



## **South Elevation**

The south elevation faces New Street and is clad in decorative mosaic similar to the north and west facades. The elevation has a concrete ramp with iron pipe railing and a single-leaf steel door. A large, squared garage opening contains a roll-down wood door. Wall openings hold paired 15-light steel windows two air conditioners.



**Figure 7:** South Elevation



## 7. Significance

The Painted Bride Arts Center at 230-36 Vine Street is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The site is eligible for listing under the following Criteria for Designation, as per Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation.
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation.
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or City.
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

Founded in 1969 in a rented storefront at 527 South Street, the Painted Bride Art Center created the first alternative art space in Philadelphia that showcased cultural diversity and provided opportunities to underrepresented artists. The Painted Bride widened access and recognition for art and artists beyond mainstream galleries and institutions while playing a principal role in the cultural boom that revitalized South Street in the 1970s. In 1982, the Painted Bride purchased the former Eastern Elevator Company at 230-36 Vine Street that stood amid vacant commercial and industrial buildings. Its move to Old City advanced the neighborhood's transformation into an artistic and cultural community.

The mosaic façade of 230-36 Vine Street is one of artist Isaiah Zagar's defining works. The Painted Bride's 1991 commission to create a public face for their organization represents a pivotal moment in Zagar's artistic development. The exterior facade is artist's first use of his innovative "total embellishment" style—mosaics that encompass a building's exterior walls from street to roofline (*Criterion F*). Since the late 1960s, Zagar has created hundreds of murals in Philadelphia. Using donated and recycled materials, the artist's community-based works enliven building walls throughout Philadelphia with imagery, stories, portraiture, and word play (*Criterion E*). The vibrant mosaic façade of 230-236 Vine Street is inextricably linked to history of the Painted Bride and is a singular visual feature of the Old City arts district (*Criterion H*).

Today, Old City is a lively, historic neighborhood and serves as home to galleries, theater and dance companies, artists' cooperatives and workshops, design firms, and museums. As an advocate for the arts, the Painted Bride was a key contributor to two neighborhood revivals—South Street and Old City. The Painted Bride's history reflects the important social and historical pattern of artists' movement within cities and their impact to the built environment. 230-36 Vine Street exemplifies the Painted Bride's influence on the cultural, economic, and social heritage of Old City and Philadelphia (*Criterion J*).

## PAINTED BRIDE ART CENTER

***Criterion J: Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.***

In 1969, South Street residents Gerry Givnish, Frank Vavricka, John Kammer, and Deryl Mackie leased a former bridal shop at 527 South Street for \$100 a month. All graduates of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, they named the space the “Painted Bride” and it became the first artist run gallery in Philadelphia. At that time, Philadelphia had only a handful of galleries, none of which were open to young, untested talent. In addition to providing gallery space, Givnish and company found themselves increasingly giving over their space for concerts and small dance and theatrical events.<sup>3</sup>

“After we started, we found our mission, so to speak, which was to provide gallery and performance space for independent artists,” said Givnish. “We responded to ideas. A pianist friend wanted to do a piano series, so he brought a piano in. There was almost nothing for the grassroots in Philadelphia. There was nothing entry-level for the artist—only major institutions.”

Ellen Forman whose dance company started at the Painted Bride...remembers the early days very well. “There was very little in Philadelphia in terms of performance space anywhere,” she said. “It was a very arid scene. The Bride was a very important place, not only for emerging artists, but for advanced art or whatever you want to call it, and we weren’t mainstream in any way. It was a real event to start something there.”<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 8:** 527 South Street, Painted Bride, view of storefront 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Salisbury. “No Longer Is It That Blushing Bride.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 16 December 1984.

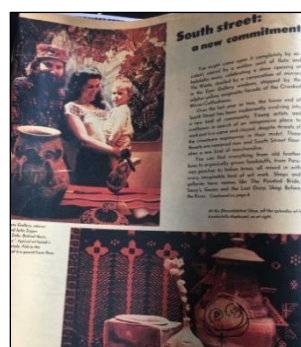
<sup>4</sup> Salisbury, 1984.



**Figure 9:** 527 South Street, Painted Bride, May 1975

The migration of artists to South Street and the emergence of its counterculture can be traced to the city government's proposal in the 1950s to build the Crosstown Expressway, a 2.8 mile highway that would cut through southeast Philadelphia. The expressway would connect the Schuylkill Expressway and I-95 along South and Bainbridge Streets.<sup>5</sup> The plan called for extensive demolition of South Street, and as a result, property values rapidly declined during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As the area became known for its low rents and affordability, artists moved in.

The plan to run a major traffic artery through Center City and specifically South Street was met with controversy and resistance by residents and business owners. The artists and performers involved with the Painted Bride also played a significant role in the Crosstown Expressway protests. Protests peaked during the late 1960s and early 1970s, with plans for the expressway finally abandoned by the city government in 1974. With the threat of neighborhood demolition removed, a full South Street renaissance ensued and the Painted Bride became one of the cultural epicenters for the street.<sup>6</sup>



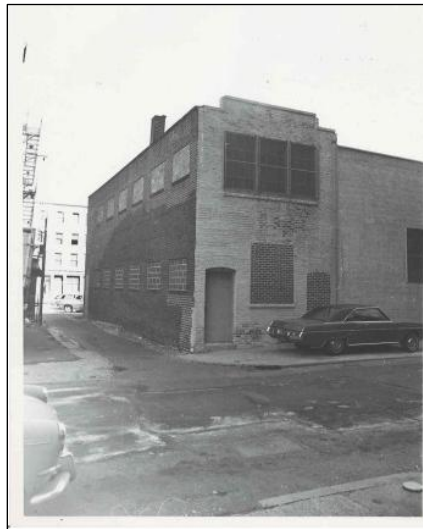
**Figures 10-12:** 1970s articles focused on South Street's creative and cultural scene (including the Painted Bride and Isaiah Zagar). Articles courtesy of PMG archives & Isaiah Zagar.

<sup>5</sup> David Clow. "House Divided: Philadelphia's Controversial Crosstown Expressway as a Planning Laboratory." Working Paper of the American Planning Association, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Takiff. "Artistic Adrenalin for the City's Culture." *Philadelphia Daily News*. 24 January 1975.

The increasing popularity of South Street raised property values, and in 1981 the owner of the Painted Bride's storefront at 527 South Street sold the building.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the Painted Bride moved to 146 N. Bread Street in Old City.<sup>8</sup> The following year, Gerry Givnish, the remaining artist of the original founders, secured a down payment for the former Eastern Elevator Co. building at 230-36 Vine Street and purchased the building in 1982.<sup>9</sup> At the time, the area around 230-36 Vine Street in the early 1980s was described as a "stark promenade."<sup>10</sup>

The Old City neighborhood had experienced a prosperous early twentieth century as a merchant hub with easy access to the Delaware River, but when the Benjamin Franklin Bridge was completed in 1926, travelers began to bypass the area. The opening of the bridge, paired with the Great Depression of the 1930s, marked the end of investment in the area. The neighborhood was further impacted in the 1970s when it was cut off from the river by Route 95.<sup>11</sup>



**Figures 13-15:** The Painted Bride before purchase. Photos: The City of Philadelphia Historical Commission.

<sup>7</sup> City of Philadelphia Property Records shows the sales date as February 1, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Real Estate Summary. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 17 October 1982, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Real Estate Summary. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 17 October 1982, 130. City of Philadelphia Property Records shows the sales date as August 25, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Salisbury, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Oldcity.org. *A Brief History of Commercial Old City*. <http://oldcitydistrict.org/discover/a-brief-history-of5>.



The Painted Bride recognized opportunity in Old City. Artists looking for affordable spaces noticed Old City's large lofts and warehouses. Arriving in 1982, the Painted Bride joined a growing art community.<sup>12</sup> 230-236 Vine Street was originally built c. 1950 for use as a garage. The building was twice the size of the Painted Bride's South Street storefront. The organization rehabilitated the building and designed the interior to include office space, the theater, art galleries, a café, and smaller rooms suitable for poetry reading and folk music. In 1984, now with a staff of nine employees, Givinish told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "We're going to transform this factory into an arts complex."<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 16-17:** Construction in 1988 on the west side of the Painted Bride created a new gallery space (Figure 9). After 1990 (Figure 10). Photos: Painted Bride, [www.paintedbride.org](http://www.paintedbride.org).

The years following the move to 230 Vine marked considerable change for the organization, however, as they grew, the Painted Bride remained a pillar of the alternative in Philadelphia, as noted in a 1989 newspaper article:

"There is a social conscious about a lot of the work that comes through the Painted Bride,' Hayes [Christopher Hayes, Painted Bride Program Director] acknowledges. We're interested in artists who ask: 'What is contemporary society doing? What does it mean? What will happen in the future?' You have to have a vibrant, ongoing view of today *and* tomorrow.'

The Bride also takes in to account the ethnic diversity of American society, with theater works that address themselves to minority concerns. Blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics are represented in the Bride's rainbow of the arts.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Murray Dublin. "Here's a new spot for you—Old City." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 20 January 1978, 62-63.

<sup>13</sup> Salisbury, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> William B. Collins, "The Surprises at the Bride at Philadelphia's Leading Showcase of Offbeat Theater, Program Director Christopher L. Hayes Looks for Contemporary Things that Explode in the Audience's Face." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 1, 1989.

By the early 1990s, the cultural impact of the Painted Bride on Old City was evident. During the 1980s and early 1990s, as many as ten new galleries had opened in the neighborhood. Established galleries and studios took notice. The Snyderman-Works Gallery and the Highwire Gallery both moved from South Street to Old City, as did the Clay Studio from Rittenhouse Square. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported in 1990 that “these newcomers give Old City a critical mass equivalent to that of Rittenhouse Square. Certainly Old City has become the livelier of the two districts, because much of the city’s experimental work by younger artists is now concentrated there.”<sup>15</sup>

A 2005 study of Philadelphia’s post-industrial cultural districts highlights the importance of Old City’s revitalization and the role the Painted Bride played in it:

Two nonprofit organizations have played key roles in the evolution and success of Old City as an arts district—the Painted Bride Art Center and Old City Arts Association. The Painted Bride, an artists’ collective founded on South Street in 1969, purchased a building and moved into Old City in 1982. The Bride helped to anchor Old City and solidify its identity among artists as the new “South Street.” Its 250-seat theater and gallery and its commitment to vanguard arts and social change helped link emerging artists with local audiences and communities.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the importance of the building, Philadelphia artist Warren Muller reflects, “The Painted Bride stands for a turning point of art and performance in Philadelphia. The culture in our city could never have been if they had not paved the way. What the building represents is so much more than just four walls - it was an idea. It was our community. It was our lives.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Edward J. Sozanski. “Old City- New Art All Of A Sudden.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 5 September 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Susan C. Seifert and Mark J. Stern. “Natural Cultural Districts: Arts Agglomerations in Metropolitan Philadelphia and Implications for Cultural District Planning.” University of Pennsylvania. 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Smith. *Phone interview with Warren Muller*. 4 December 2017.

## ISAIAH ZAGAR

***Criterion E: Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation.***

Isaiah Zagar was born in 1939 in Philadelphia. When he was still young, his family relocated to Coney Island, New York. Though he struggled in school with dyslexia, Zagar found refuge in his creative skills and eventually enrolled at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. While in school, he studied painting and graphics, and was mentored by artists such as Richard Lindner and Barnett Newman.<sup>18</sup>

When Zagar was nineteen, he visited the renowned art environment *My Mirrored Hope* by Clarence Schmidt in Woodstock, New York. Schmidt was a locally and nationally recognized “outsider artist” and iconic pioneer of monumental environmental sculpture.<sup>19</sup> *My Mirrored Hope* was a massive found object structure created deep in the woods of Ohayo Mountain. The artwork, which was also Schmidt’s home, was a labyrinth of passageways covered in flowers, tin foil, mirror, varnish, tar, and colored glass. Additional rooms, terraces, caves, gardens, grottos, a pool, shrines and further wings were stacked upon one another, advancing up the mountain’s face.<sup>20</sup>



**Figures 18-19:** Photo of the art environment *My Mirrored Hope* (Figure 11) and artist Clarence Schmidt (Figure 12), dates unknown. *My Mirrored Hope* was destroyed in a fire in 1968. Photos: Spaces Archives, Spaces.org

<sup>18</sup> Olivia Edlund. *An Educational Guide to Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens*. Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens, 2017. The influence of mentors Richard Lindner and Barnett Newman was communicated in conversation between Isaiah Zagar and Emily Smith, January/February 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens. *Tour Script*, 2017. Information gathered through conversation with Zagar. Tours given by members of staff at PMG.

<sup>20</sup> William C, Lipke and Gregg Blasdel. *Schmidt*. Robert Hull Fleming Museum, 1975.

A few years later in 1961, Zagar viewed the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The exhibition highlighted the sophistication of mixed-media art and the genre of “assemblage”—art made by grouping found, and often, unrelated objects together. This international exhibition was one of the first to discuss the genre in depth and featured over 130 artists and 250 works of art. The exhibition focused on the complicated juxtaposition of method and materials. It validated that art did not have to be limited to a two-dimensional canvas with traditional mediums such as oils or acrylics.<sup>21</sup> Zagar’s experiences with *My Mirrored Hope* and the *Art of Assemblage* altered his perception of what art could be and became strongly influenced by the concept of the untrained or “outsider” artist.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 20:** Gallery view of The Art of Assemblage, 1961. Photo: Museum of Modern Art Archives, moma.org.

Shortly after graduating from Pratt Institute, Zagar met his wife Julia in 1965. The couple quickly married and joined the Peace Corps as conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War. Stationed in Peru for three years, the Zagars became deeply involved and inspired by local folk artists. Thus began a lifetime of collection and devotion to the international folk art community.<sup>23</sup>

The Zagars recognized that the works of folk artists were often neglected by the lens of Western European art history. These artists—indigenous, multi-generational craftspeople, honed their techniques to become masters in whatever medium their specific region was known for. Folk art expresses the cultural identity of the community and encompasses a wide variety of material such as textile, ceramic, metal, paper, and wood. Zagar became enthralled folk art and sought to

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Shaw, “The Art of Assemblage Press Release.” The Museum of Modern Art. 3 July 1961.

<sup>22</sup> City of Philadelphia, Council of the City Of Philadelphia. *Resolution No. 050085*. 3 February 2005. Honoring artist Isaiah Zagar for his 35 year commitment to make Philadelphia a “labyrinthine mosaic museum” and his dedication to saving Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens.

<sup>23</sup> Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens. *Dear Julia, An Exhibition Honoring Julia Zagar*. Exhibit brochure, 2016.

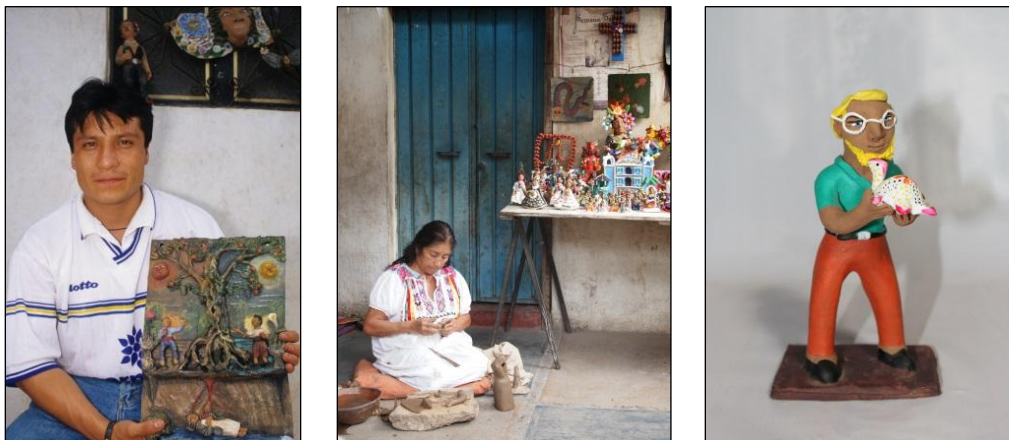


collect and collaborate with artists he admired; hoping to elevate and bring attention to the artists and their craft.<sup>24</sup>

As the Zagars traveled and collected folk art in the mid-60s, Zagar yearned for deeper relationships with the artists and the work they made. He began to commission work by taking his own drawings, giving them to an artist whose work he admired, and request they interpret his design in their own distinctive style. These ongoing collaborations, some lasting decades, resulted in thousands of pieces of completely unique designs and art pieces made by internationally recognized folk artists from around the world.<sup>25</sup>



**Figures 21-23:** A few examples of the internationally distinguished folk artists Zagar works with from Oaxaca, Mexico: Irma Blanco (Figure 21), Jose Antonio Garcia (Figure 22), Work by Jose Antonio Garcia (Figure 23). Photos: Philadelphia's Magic Gardens Archives (PMG)



**Figures 24-26:** Demetrio Aguilar (Figure 24), Josefina Aguilar (Figure 25), and work by the Aguilar Family (Figure 26). Photos: PMG

After three years in Peru, the Zagars returned to the United States and moved to Philadelphia. They bought a storefront at 402 South Street and opened the Eyes Gallery, a folk art store that featured work from their travels.<sup>26</sup>

In the late 1960s, the area around South Street was in decline. The state of South Street mirrored challenges throughout Philadelphia—the city's population, which peaked in the 1950s, suffered greatly in the 1960s and 1970s due to suburban flight, restructuring of industry, and loss of

<sup>24</sup> Graburn, Nelson H. H. *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*. University of California Press, 1976, 195-196.

<sup>25</sup> Philadelphia's Magic Gardens. "Interweave: Fabric Works by Folk Artists & Isaiah Zagar Press Release." 5 May 2017.

<sup>26</sup> "The Eyes Gallery." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 8 December 1968, 144.

jobs.<sup>27</sup> Plans for the Crosstown Expressway further depressed property values on South Street. For the Zagars though, lower property values on South Street in the late 1960s presented an opportunity as they could afford to purchase property and maintain their artistic freedom. Along with others in their community, the Zagars adamantly protested the Crosstown Expressway for years until the city permanently cancelled the project in 1974.

Zagar began creating mosaics shortly after his return from the Peace Corps. After the move to South Street in 1968, he suffered a mental breakdown and began mosaicking as a form of therapy. Zagar explained his introduction to the medium and how the city became an integral part of this work:

When we moved to Philadelphia there were all these materials that were available to me because our neighborhood was abandoned. After my breakdown, I could see my nervous system breaking apart. I could see it shattering. And then while I was working I found myself breaking and breaking things and putting them back together. It was like what I was experiencing in my body. It had a rationale. It was the whole idea of recovering that which is broken and healing through art.<sup>28</sup>

These earliest mosaics, at 402 South Street, were rudimentary. Zagar focused on the labor-intensive techniques of mosaicking as a means to regain his well-being and health. When he finished the interior walls of 402 South Street, he then moved outside and started working on the neglected walls in the surrounding neighborhood.



**Figure 27:** Zagar working outside the Eyes Gallery (402 South Street) in 1970. Photo: PMG

<sup>27</sup> Weigley, RF et al. (eds). *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982.

<sup>28</sup> Isaiah Zagar, videotaped interview in 2014. Archives of Philadelphia's Magic Gardens.

Zagar's self-taught mosaicking technique was developed through trial-and-error art making. It is now known in the international mosaicking community as 'The Zagar Method.'<sup>29</sup> The Zagar Method is driven by Zagar's desire to "make art without the parameters of the rectangular format."<sup>30</sup> The artist's innovative mosaicking technique combines monumental scale, community themes, and unorthodox materials to reinvent ordinary urban buildings.

Traditional mosaic artists use neatly cut pieces to create an image that is entirely mapped out before they start. In contrast, Zagar has a general idea of what his mural will feature, the majority of his work is created spontaneously. [Zagar's] works are not made of tiny fingernail-sized ceramic or glass chips in the Roman or Byzantine manner: Zagar's elements are large chunks of broken crockery, even whole teapots and figurines, bits of mirror and his own hand-painted tiles, all set in pastel-tinted cement.<sup>31</sup> Unlike most mosaicists, Zagar hand mixes and dyes his own cement, which gives his mosaics the extremely bright and rich colors that is characteristic of his work.



**Figure 28:** Zagar working on the Eyes Gallery in 1968. Photo: PMG

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<sup>29</sup> Jason Church. "Magical Mosaics: Preserving Isaiah Zagar's Philadelphia Art Environment." National Center for Preservation Technology & Training, 29 March 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Diane Goldsmith. "A City Artist Shares His Secrets." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 5 December 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Miriam Seidel. "Drawing Strength From Fragility of Eggshells." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 9 January 1998.





**Figure 29:** The mural at 510 Christian Street is titled 'Homage to Mike Matteo: Master Plumber' and features a portrait and stories of Matteo (right side of the wall), who was the local plumber. Photo: PMG

Zagar's works reflect Philadelphia, featuring visual narratives highlighting stories of residents, neighbors, and organizations. For most projects, he utilizes the help of community residents either in the creation of the actual mosaic or in the form of collected objects and stories.

The artist's most well known work, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (PMG), spans half a block and has become an internationally-known museum that is a completely immersive outdoor art installation with indoor galleries (Figure 30). PMG has been recognized as one of the finest examples of an American art environment and is unique to the field since it is one of the only art environments located directly in an urban setting.<sup>32</sup> Since opening to the public in 2008, PMG has welcomed over 750,000 local and international guests.<sup>33</sup>

Having installed public mosaics for 50 years in Philadelphia, there are several key works that are not only excellent demonstrations of this unique technique, but also document pivotal moments in the artist's life and career, as well as significant cultural moments for Philadelphia. Examples of these works are the Eyes Gallery (402 South Street) created in 1968, 826 South Street, created in 1984, 610 South 10<sup>th</sup> Street, created in 1981, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (1020-1026 South Street) started in 1991, the Painted Bride (230-236 Vine Street) started in 1991, and Watkins Street Studio (1003 Watkins Street) started in 2006.

Zagar has been awarded numerous national and international commissions, residencies, and grants for his work, including a Pew Charitable Trust award as well as a National Endowment for the Arts award. His works are included in the permanent collections of art institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, The Brandywine River Museum of Art, and the Museo de Art Contemporáneo de San Luis Potosí, Mexico.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Stone, "Preservation Survey by Lisa Stone, Curator & Adjunct Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago." June 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Philadelphia's Magic Gardens. *Admissions Report*, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> City of Philadelphia. *Resolution No. 050085*, 2005.





**Figure 30:** Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, 2017. Photo: David Soffa

In 2005, Zagar received honors from the City of Philadelphia for his “commitment to make Philadelphia a “labyrinthine mosaic.”<sup>35</sup> In 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama recognized the artist for his “unique contribution to his community.”<sup>36</sup> In 2015, The Society of American Mosaic Artists featured Zagar as the guest of honor and keynote speaker with the Painted Bride being a featured notable work.

Zagar is currently 78 years old and his identity is inextricably linked to Philadelphia's urban landscape as a prolific artist of public art. Over 220 public Zagar mosaics are located throughout Philadelphia, with 28 Zagar mosaics located elsewhere in the world, including Arizona, Hawaii, New York, California, Kansas, Mexico, Chile, and India. Today, Philadelphia is home to the largest number of public mosaic created by one artist.<sup>37</sup> There are over 1,000,000 square feet (or 24 acres) of public mosaics in the city, surpassing Antonio Gaudi's mosaicked Barcelona (Spain) and Nek Chand's Rock Garden of Chandigarh (India).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> City of Philadelphia, *Resolution No. 050085*, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Michelle Obama, Letter to Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, September 21, 2009. Philadelphia's Magic Gardens Archives.

<sup>37</sup> “Mozaico.” *Living Mosaics*. 22 December 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Philadelphia's Magic Gardens. *Isaiah Zagar Public Mosaic Survey, 2016-Present*. Archives of Philadelphia's Magic Gardens. A survey conducted by Philadelphia's Magic Gardens. Each mosaic site has been visited by staff. Mosaic works have been measured and documented.

## THE PAINTED BRIDE MOSAIC

*Criterion F: Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation.*

*Criterion H: Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or City.*

When Zagar was invited to work on the façade of the Painted Bride in the early 1990s, the communal mood in Old City was not only upbeat for the first time in years, it was practically euphoric.<sup>39</sup> Although the artist had been mosaicking for over 20 years, 230-236 Vine Street provided one of the largest canvases to date for Zagar's work and is an example of an innovative turning point in Zagar's career.<sup>40</sup> The choice of Zagar was apt, as the artist and the Painted Bride began on South Street in the late 1960s and were both artistically, socially, and politically active in the South Street community. Twenty years later, their collaboration on the mosaic façade in Old City commemorates their shared history and dedication to the arts in Philadelphia.

When the mosaicking process on the building began in 1991, Zagar had never attempted a full-wall embellishment from street to roof and had only worked on smaller walls with the help of a ladder. He first worked on street-level for many years of the 230-236 Vine Street project, but with the assistance of Givnish, the director of The Painted Bride, Zagar was able to secure scaffolding to complete the full façade from top to bottom- a feat that he had never accomplished before. A 1993 Philadelphia Daily News article describes the project perfectly:

From sidewalk to roof every inch is colorfully painted and decorated in wild, imaginative detail. Phrases are spelled out in bit of broken mirror or tile. In many cases, the words or letters are upside down or the message is backwards. "I'm dyslexic, so I use it in my art," Zagar explains.

There are swirls, circles, seashells, Chinese writing and bits and pieces of ceramic birds, butterflies, flowers, human figures, and ceramic feet. "Isaiah took a simple industrial building with no character and made it fascinating," says Gerry Givnish, executive director of the Painted Bride. Zagar's weird art has given the Painted Bride near landmark status.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Sozanski, 1990.

<sup>40</sup> Congdon, Kristin G., and Kara Kelley Hallmark. *American Folk Art a Regional Reference*. ABC-CLIO, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Ron Avery, "Don't Paint, Zagarize." *The Philadelphia Daily News*, September 17, 1993.



**Figures 31-33** (above and below) The Painted Bride in progress. This project was the first time Zagar used scaffolding on a project for full mosaic embellishment from street to roof.







**Figure 34:** Scaffolding in place during the project.

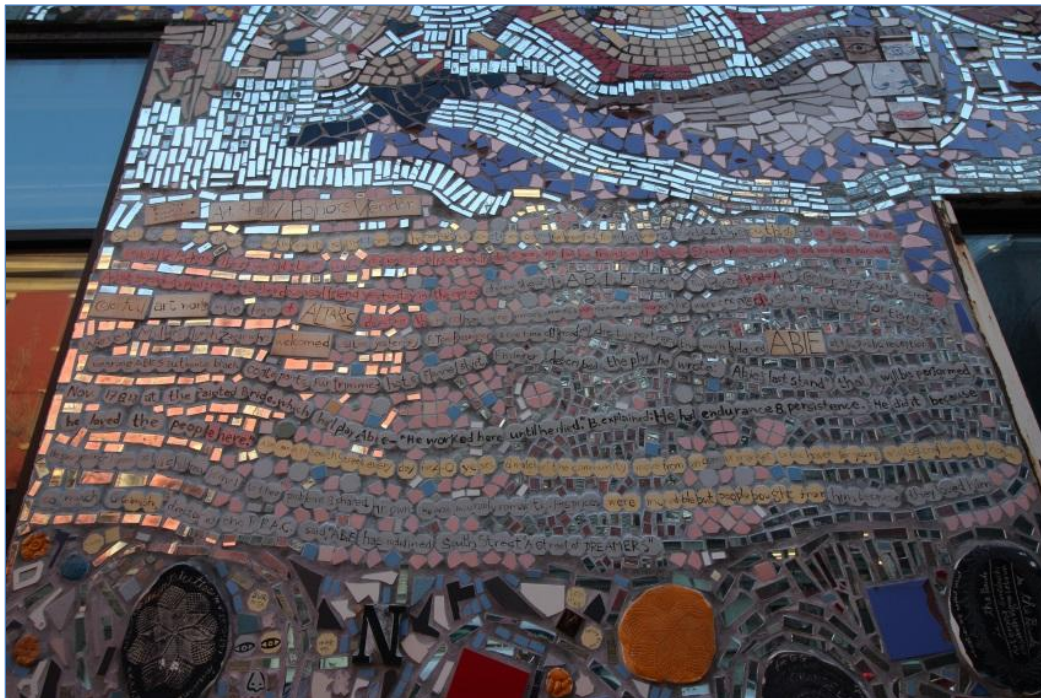
An excellent example of Zagar's use of local storytelling is on the north façade of the Painted Bride. Zagar handwrote an entire 1978 article from the Philadelphia Bulletin in tile (Figure 35). The article details the story of Abe Kravitz, beloved South Street merchant, as well as other key members of the South Street Renaissance. The text below is written verbatim from the mosaic and includes grammatical and spelling errors due to Zagar's dyslexia:

Bulliten Nov. 1978 Suzanne Gordon  
Art Show Honors Vendor

South Street honors "Wisdom peddler." Abe Kravitz sold fruit, homemade horseradish & sometimes oatmeal for breakfast from his vending stand at 4th. & South. Sts. - But mostly Kravitz peddled wisdom. The 84 year old street vendor, affectionately called Grandpa died 2 years ago, but his friends in the South Street Renaissance area still remember him well. Artists & residents paid tribute to their deceased friend yesterday in the opening of a new show "The ABIE works" at the Painted Bride Art Center, 527 South Street. Colorful art works in the form of altars, depicting Abie in collages using mirrors, ceramics, & pictures make up the "works" that were created by the South Street artists Warren Muller & Isaiah Zagar who welcomed visitors yesterday. & Tom Bissinger, a one time off Broadway director, portrayed the much beloved ABIE at the public reception wearing ABIE's authentic black coat & pants, fur trimmed hat & flannel shirt. Bissinger described the play he wrote: "Abie's last stand", that will be performed Nov. 17 & 18 at the Painted Bride, which he'll play Abie- "He worked here until he died" B. explained: He has endurance & persistence. He did it because he loved the people here. "Abie came to South Street everyday for 40 years & watched the community move from an open air market to the haven for young artists & craftsme it is now. He saw young hippies as his children, listened to their problems & shared his own. He was incurably romantic. His prices were incredible but people bought from him because they loved him so much G. Givnish, director of the P.B.A.C. [Painted Bride Art Center] said "ABIE has redefined South Street "A Street of DREAMERS"<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Isaiah Zagar, North façade of Painted Bride Art Center, 230 Vine Street, c. 1991.





**Figure 35:** Detail of north façade with handwritten text by Zagar. Photo: PMG

The phrases “Art is the center of the real world” and “Philadelphia is the center of the art world” are featured prominently in most of Zagar’s artworks, including on the southern wall of the Painted Bride (Figure 36). Zagar began using these phrases in the 1970s when he was rejected from numerous New York galleries. Instead of thinking of New York as the only art world that mattered, the artist decided he wanted to work to make Philadelphia become the center of the art world.<sup>43</sup>



**Figure 36-37:** ‘Art is the center of the real world/Philadelphia is the center of the art world’ stamped into a tile (left), South façade of the Painted Bride with the initialism, ART I.S.T.C.O.T. REAL.W (right). Photos: PMG

<sup>43</sup> Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens. *Tour Script*, 2017. Information gathered through conversation with Zagar. Tours given by members of staff at PMG.

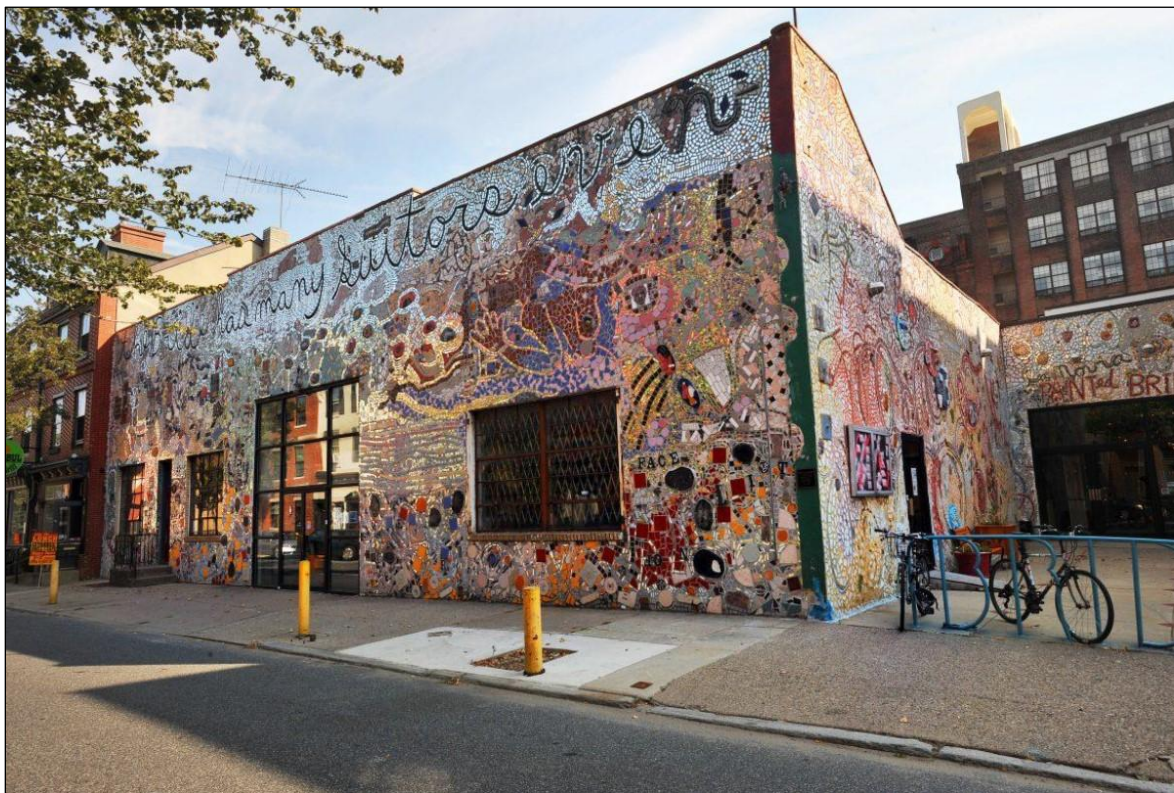
Ron Avery of the Philadelphia Daily News wrote in 1993 about Zagar's unique approach to cultural placemaking:

"This is only the beginning of my dream for Philadelphia," declares [Zagar] the bearded 54 year-old artist. "My dream of turning all of Philadelphia into tile city- to turn all these ugly old stucco walls into a manifesto of magic. ...I want to see this city changed into a city of the imagination.

The prototype of Zagar's grand dream for Philadelphia can be found on the walls of the Painted Bride on Vine Street near 3<sup>rd</sup>, especially the side wall on Bodine Street and the rear wall on New Street.

It has taken Zagar two years, lots of his own cash and the occasional help of about 50 others to complete what might be the most eccentric, colorful wall mural on planet earth.<sup>44</sup>

Zagar's embellishment of 230-36 Vine Street marked the height of Old City's cultural boom and the culmination of the Painted Bride Art Center in bringing together audiences, artists, and communities of how Philadelphia creates and experiences art.<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 38:** The completed façade of the Painted Bride, present day. The text along the top of the front façade reads "The Bride has many suitors, even." This is a reference to artist Marcel Duchamp's work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*. This artwork by Duchamp is in the collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>44</sup> Ron Avery, "Don't Paint, Zagarize." *The Philadelphia Daily News*. 17 September 1993.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Crimmins, *Old City Recognized Nationally for Its Art Scene*. [Podcast] NewsWorks Tonight, WHYY, 2013.



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