

MEDIA & PRESS INFORMATION



Philadelphia's
**MAGIC
GARDENS**

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PHILADELPHIA'S MAGIC GARDENS

Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (PMG) is an immersive mixed media art environment that is completely covered with mosaics. The creator, Isaiah Zagar, used handmade tiles, bottles, bicycle wheels, mirror, and international folk art to chronicle his life and influences. The exploratory space is made up of two indoor galleries and a bi-level outdoor sculpture garden.

As a nonprofit museum, PMG celebrates art in its many forms through community outreach, public programs, hands-on activities, exhibitions, and tours. We welcome everyone to explore the space and embrace the possibility of self expression.



"Zagar's artwork is what makes South Street, South Street."

RALPH CIPRIANO, Philadelphia Inquirer, 1998

MISSION STATEMENT

Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (PMG) inspires creativity and community engagement by educating the public about folk, mosaic, and visionary art. PMG preserves, interprets, and provides access to Isaiah Zagar's unique mosaic art environment and his public murals.





ISAIAH ZAGAR



Isaiah Zagar in Peru, mid 1960s



Isaiah Zagar at 4th and Bainbridge Streets, mid 1970s

BIOGRAPHY

Isaiah Zagar is an award-winning mosaic mural artist whose work can be found on more than 200 public walls throughout the city of Philadelphia and around the world. Born in Philadelphia and raised in Brooklyn, Zagar received his B.F.A. in Painting & Graphics at the Pratt Institute of Art in New York City. When he was 19 years old, Zagar discovered the art environment of Clarence Schmidt in Woodstock, New York. This shaped his ideas of what art could be and started a lifelong interest in art environments and their creators.

Zagar's artwork is heavily influenced by his travels and the personal connections he has made with international folk and visionary artists. Isaiah and his wife Julia completed three years of Peace Corps service in Peru in the mid-1960s, working with folk artists in the Puno region near Lake Titicaca. Soon after, they settled in Philadelphia and began their life's work of creating public art and fostering creativity in all its varied forms.

In addition to his three-year Peace Corps service in Peru, Isaiah has completed artist residencies in Tianjin, China, and Rajasthan, India. He also participated in a residency at the Kohler Co. Pottery Foundry in Wisconsin.

Zagar's work is included in the permanent collections of numerous art institutions, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and has been featured in solo exhibitions throughout the Philadelphia area. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The personal story of Zagar and his family is captured in the award-winning 2008 documentary, [In A Dream](#), created by his son Jeremiah Zagar.

ARTIST STATEMENT

“My work is marked by events and is a **mirror of the mind** that is building and falling apart, having a logic but close to chaos, refusing to stay still for the camera, and giving one a sense of **heaven and hell simultaneously.**”





HISTORY

ISAIAH AND JULIA ZAGAR moved to the South Street neighborhood in 1968 and opened their folk art store the Eye's Gallery at 402 South Street later that year. For years the city had discussed a plan to demolish South Street to construct the Crosstown Expressway, connecting interstates 76 and 95. The plan had devastating effects on the neighborhood, but the mostly Black residents of the area formed a coalition to fight against the proposed highway. Led by housing activists like Alice Lipscomb and George Dukes, this group had already been organizing for more than a decade when the Zagars joined in protesting with them. The coalition was eventually successful, and the city finally canceled the plan in 1974.

During this time the Zagars were part of a group of young artists who had moved into the derelict east end of South Street, and this period of artistic rebirth was coined the "South Street Renaissance." The Zagars were able to acquire several properties for very little money during this phase, which led to Isaiah's first experiments with creating his own art environment. The Eye's Gallery and their rental property at 610 S. 10th Street were purchased during this time, and in the 1980s they bought a new home at 826 South Street and studio at 1003 Kater Street. They all became canvases as Isaiah tried out different methods of assemblage, mosaic, and sculpture. These spaces were a precursor to the public work he would create in the coming years.

In 1991, Zagar started working on the vacant lots located near his studio at 1020 South Street. He first mosaicked the buildings on either side of the property, and then spent years sculpting multi-layer walls out of found objects. At the same time he was beginning to create murals on public walls throughout Philadelphia. This included some of his most ambitious work to date, like the façades of the Painted Bride Art Center and the historic Engine Co. 11 building.



Construction of a passageway at Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, 2006

In 2004, the Boston-based owner of the South Street lots discovered Zagar's installation at 1020 South Street and decided to sell the land, calling for the work to be dismantled. Unwilling to witness the destruction of the now-beloved neighborhood art environment, the community rushed to support the artist. His creation, newly titled Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, quickly became incorporated as a nonprofit organization with the intention of preserving the artwork at the PMG site and throughout Philadelphia. Zagar was then able to develop the site even further; excavating tunnels and grottos.

In 2008, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens opened to the public and visitors now have the opportunity to participate in tours, art activities, hands-on interpretive experiences, workshops, concerts, exhibitions, and much more. PMG is dedicated to preserving and maintaining the work at the main site, as well as more than 200 public murals in the region.

The entirety of the Philadelphia's Magic Gardens site is owned and preserved by the 501(c)3 nonprofit. While PMG continues to collaborate with Zagar, the site is not managed or operated by him. Philadelphia's Magic Gardens has its own staff and Board of Directors, and showcases and cultivates the work of various artists and talents from around the world while supporting values that include originality, community, and inspiring others.



Philadelphia's Magic Gardens site today



KEY PROGRAMMING

PMG is open to the public for self-guided tours of the permanent mosaic art installation and temporary exhibitions. Core programs include:

PECO FAMILY JAMS

Free, monthly hands-on activities for all visitors, including family-friendly tours.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

An initiative to provide low-cost or free arts experiences within local communities. PMG collaborates with other organizations and businesses to provide art experiences outside the museum, furthering PMG's mission to inspire creativity and community engagement and allowing participants to enjoy art in new ways.

TOURS

Knowledgeable staff educators lead groups of all ages on both public and private tours of PMG's main site and murals in the surrounding blocks. Tours focus on Isaiah Zagar's influences and process, other art environments, Mexican folk art, the history of the neighborhood, critical thinking and talking about art, and more. The Visionary Visits program offers discounted tours for groups with financial need.

TWILIGHT IN THE GARDENS SERIES

Monthly events that include a live performance, hands-on art activity, and self-guided tours of the space.

ART EXHIBITIONS

Temporary rotating exhibitions that display the works of local, national, and international artists whose art compliments or responds to Isaiah Zagar's art environment in unique and exciting ways. PMG seeks to show artists whose work demonstrates an unconventional understanding of materials, and reflects the various themes throughout PMG, including mosaic, folk, and self-taught arts.

GARDEN PARTY

PMG's happy hour series that creates casual opportunities to socialize after work in our stunning sculpture labyrinth.

