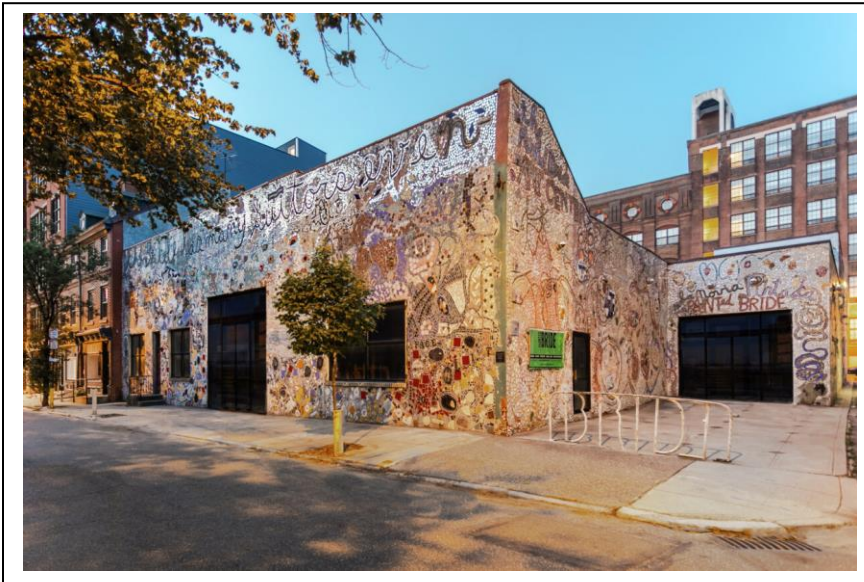


Self-Guided Tour of The Skin of the Bride (230-236 Vine Street)

This is the former home of the Painted Bride Art Center. In 2017, this building was put up for sale. The Skin of the Bride, the mosaic that covers the building from street to roofline, was created by Isaiah Zagar.



Born in 1939, Isaiah Zagar has made over 220 murals in Philadelphia. These community-based mosaics -- made from donated, salvaged, and recycled materials -- sparkle across building surfaces, enlivening the city with portraits, word play, and art history.



Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (PMG) is a non-profit that preserves and operates the enormous art environment created by Isaiah at 1020 South Street. It also works to preserve Isaiah's other murals by offering free maintenance and repairs.

Many property owners see themselves as guardians of their Zagar murals. These mosaics are part of Philly's unique cultural legacy.

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE BRIDE?

For more than five years, PMG fought to save The Skin of the Bride from demolition. (You can find key dates and newspaper articles [here](#).) For most of that time, the building was covered in black netting. In the summer of 2023 the netting was removed. In October 2023 demolition permits were pulled for the building. The fight to save The Skin of the Bride was lost.

This is one of Isaiah's most monumental and defining works. It was the culmination of all the work he had done before and a catalyst for what came after, including Philadelphia's Magic Gardens.



Isaiah worked on this mural for nine years. It is a celebration of art and artists, from the cave painters of Lascaux to local creatives who performed and exhibited at the Painted Bride and beyond.

"Isaiah woke up at 5 a.m. each morning and drove down to 230 Vine Street," recalls Isaiah's wife Julia Zagar. "He dreamt of it as being his masterpiece and worked 10-12 hours a day until he collapsed with exhaustion."

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ZAGARS AND THE PAINTED BRIDE?

The Painted Bride Art Center opened in 1969 in an old bridal salon at 527 South Street. It was just one block away from the Eye's Gallery, which Julia and Isaiah Zagar had opened the year before. The Painted Bride was founded by four visual artists who had recently graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Gerry Givnish became the first Executive Director and continued to run the Bride for 30 years. The other founders were Frank Vavricka, John Kammer, and Deryl Mackie.



Julia Zagar in the Eye's Gallery which she has operated for more than half a century

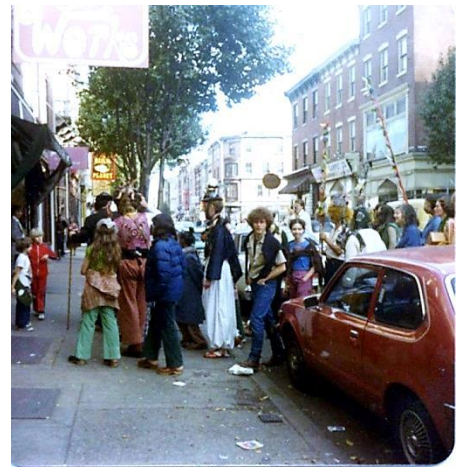


The Painted Bride at its South Street location, where it remained until 1982

The Painted Bride was the city's first artist-run gallery space. It became a very special place for the young artists who called South Street home, including the Zagars. Isaiah participated in five exhibitions at the Bride and led at least one art parade through its doors. Isaiah and Julia also served as members of the Painted Bride's Board of Directors for five years.



Outside the Painted Bride at 527 South Street



Isaiah and light sculptor Warren Muller lead an art parade to the Painted Bride

In 1982, rising rents along South Street caused the Painted Bride to look for a cheaper home in Old City. It moved into the old Eastern Elevator Factory on Vine Street. Isaiah transformed the new Bride's back hallway, using the same mosaic techniques he had used in the Eye's Gallery and his own home.



Isaiah, working with longtime collaborator Jeff Baumann, inside the Painted Bride, circa 1983



The Zagars' apartment at 402 South Street, circa 1975

As the Painted Bride Art Center continued to expand, so did Isaiah's vision of what he could offer the Bride.

"Isaiah's whole purpose was to be part of a thriving art scene," says Julia Zagar, "and to contribute in some way to the city he loved."



Turning a garage into a gallery at 230 Vine Street, 1988



The Painted Bride Art Center's new gallery entrance, circa 1990

"Isaiah took a simple industrial building with no character and made it fascinating," said co-founder Gerry Givnish.



The Vine Street façade of The Skin of the Bride

Now, let's take a closer look at some unique elements in this artwork

EXPLORING THE SKIN OF THE BRIDE

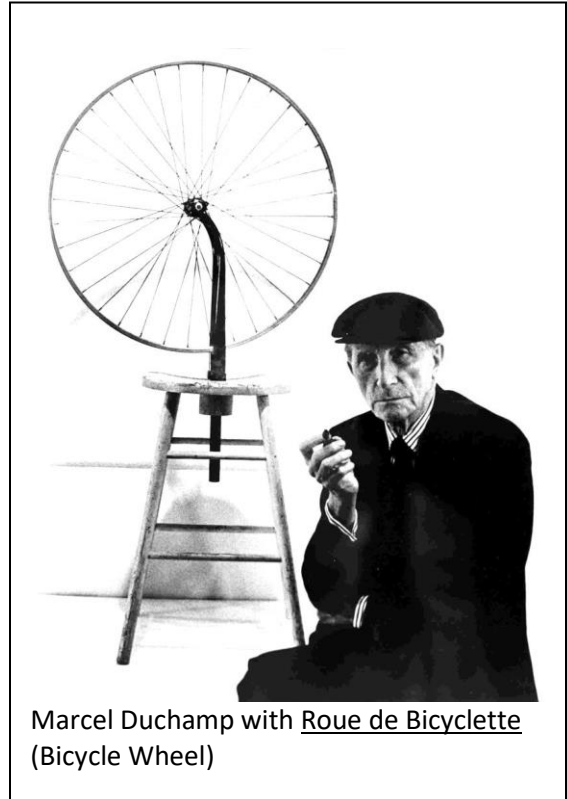
Start by standing across the street so that you can see the Vine Street facade in its entirety

Look for the phrase that runs across the top of the building. It says “The Bride has many suitors – even.” This is a reference to the achievements of the Painted Bride Art Center. It is also a reference to Marcel Duchamp’s artwork The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. It is in the permanent collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was a French Dada artist who is frequently referenced in Isaiah’s works. You can see this many times in the Skin of the Bride.



The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass), Marcel Duchamp. 1915-1923



Marcel Duchamp with Roue de Bicyclette (Bicycle Wheel)



Look at the word Bride. Find a woman’s face between the letters R and I. This is a portrait of Julia, Isaiah’s wife. Isaiah has created thousands of portraits of Julia throughout his career.



Under the letter B in the word Bride, find a face painted across nine brown tiles. This is a portrait of Patsy Ratchett. The initials P.R. appear on either side of her chin. Patsy Ratchett is the drag persona of sculptor Warren Muller, who created chandeliers for the Painted Bride’s lobby.

The initials GG, which can be seen in Ratchett’s wig, stand for Gerry Givnish. Gerry, Warren, and Isaiah performed together on the Painted Bride stage.

Ratchett’s neckline, shoulders, and arms are created with lines of cut mirror. Isaiah often uses small rectangles of mirror to create outlines for words and bodies. On a cloudy day, the mirrored pieces turn silver and the bodies are easier to see.

Allow your eyes to travel all the way to the right, stopping above the last window. Find a woman's face painted across six brown tiles. This figure is lying down with her right hand under her head. The left arm is stretched over the top of her hip. Cupped in her left hand are the words: Laurel Moon is a real grouter.

Laurel Moon (better known as Laurel True) was Isaiah's first student. In 1991, Isaiah brought Laurel True to the Painted Bride Art Center. Together, they redid all the mosaics in the back hallway. They also began the Skin of the Bride on the wall facing New Street.

Laurel True returned in 1999 to work with Isaiah on the Vine Street façade. By then, Gerry Givnish had arranged for scaffolding.



A portion of the hallway, redone by Isaiah and Laurel True



The New Street façade in progress, 1991

Cross the street to find a block of text between the glass doors and the rightmost window. These words come from a 1978 Philadelphia Bulletin newspaper article. It is about “Abie’s Works,” a group show held at the Painted Bride. The multi-media art exhibition was a tribute to Abie Kravitz, a South Street fruit vendor. He sold oatmeal for breakfast and ground fresh horseradish for Passover. Isaiah thought of Kravitz as a grandfather figure.

Isaiah created hundreds of portraits of Kravitz which became an installation in the Zagars’ garden. Isaiah’s installation was moved to the Painted Bride to serve as the stage set for a musical by Tom Bissinger called “Abie’s Last Stand.” (The lyrics from one of the songs adorn a wall at Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens.) At the opening of the exhibition, Bissinger, then director of Theatre for the Living Arts, dressed as Kravitz. Isaiah and Warren Muller greeted people at the door.

Gerry Givnish was quoted in the original article. His name appears in the tiles as GG. Some of the text includes grammatical and spelling errors due to Zagars’ dyslexia.

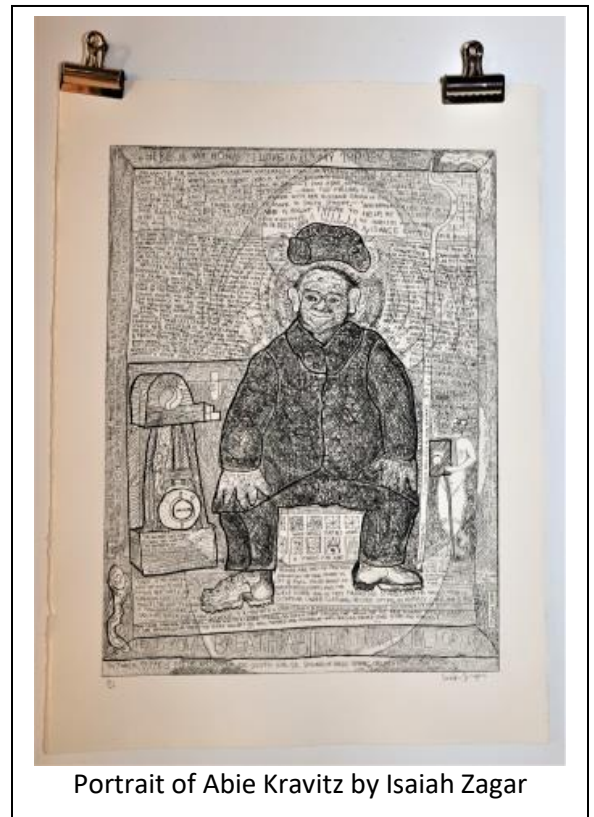


Look for a black circular tile below the newspaper text, near the sidewalk. This is one of the many tiles Isaiah made by hand. The pattern on the outer edge is made by pressing a lace doily into raw clay. Much of the text on this tile is written backwards, a nod to Leonardo da Vinci's mirror writing.

Isaiah learned to write backwards while working in a print studio. In printmaking, images and words etched onto a plate will appear reversed on paper. Isaiah has created hundreds of text-heavy etchings, like the one below depicting Abie Kravitz. Isaiah also uses a lot of backwards writing in his murals.

This tile reads: "During the latter part of the 20th century there was efflorescence of culture in the city of Philadelphia unequaled in the history of planet earth"

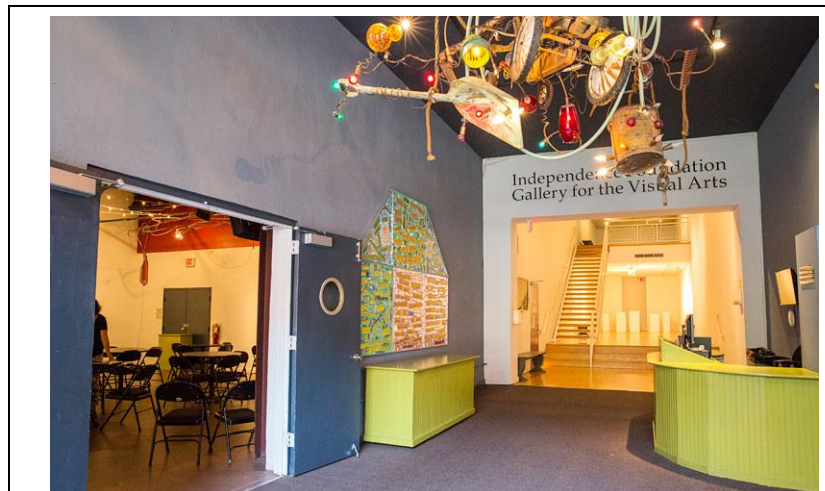
At the top of the tile, there is a reference to the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett.



Portrait of Abie Kravitz by Isaiah Zagar

On the same wall, near a bright yellow doily tile, look for another black tile with text. Part of this tile reads, "For GG: Isaiah explains Warren's chandelier. Light it feed it to the Painted Bride. List: Tractor, hose, shovel, rake."

When sculptor Warren Muller made a chandelier for the Bride's lobby, Gerry Givnish asked for an artist's statement about the piece. Muller asked Isaiah to write it. Isaiah wrote the statement on this tile. This tile also includes a story about an old South Street neighbor named Benny Dorfman.



Light sculpture by Warren Muller in the Painted Bride's lobby

Move past the last window and look up to find a man in a reddish bowler hat. Isaiah often depicts people wearing hats, a conscious nod to the Arnolfini Portrait by Jan van Eyck.

“South Street Renaissance” appears above this portrait. This is a phrase often used by newspaper writers to describe the revitalization of South Street by young artists, notably those congregating at the Painted Bride and Eye’s Gallery.

The acronym “PITCOAW” circles the lower half of the portrait. This stands for Philadelphia Is the Center Of The Art World. Isaiah began including this phrase in his artworks after being rejected by New York galleries in the 1970s.



To the right of the window, under the red word FACE, you will find the name of the mural and the dates during which it was completed etched into a circular black tile.

“Mirrorical Drops” is a phrase taken from Duchamp’s The Green Box, in which Duchamp wrote: “The mirrorical drops, not the drops themselves but their image, pass between these two states of the same figure.”

Isaiah often quotes artists he admires, giving new context to the historic phrases. “Mirrorical drops” appears in many of Isaiah’s works and is a good description for the pieces of mirror that cascade across his walls.



Continue to the right, to the next circular black tile. This tile reads, “Votarys: Botero, Rothko, Giotto, Bearden, Fragonard, Soutine.” A votary is a spiritual practitioner who has made vows of service. It can also be applied to someone who loves or worships something like art. Isaiah has included artists who span many ages, countries, and styles. This is one of many “votary” tiles included in this mural. Below are examples of these artists’ work.



Fernando Botero



Romare Bearden



Jean-Honoré Fragonard



Chaim Soutine



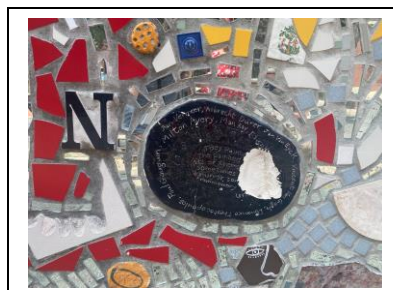
Giotto di Bondone

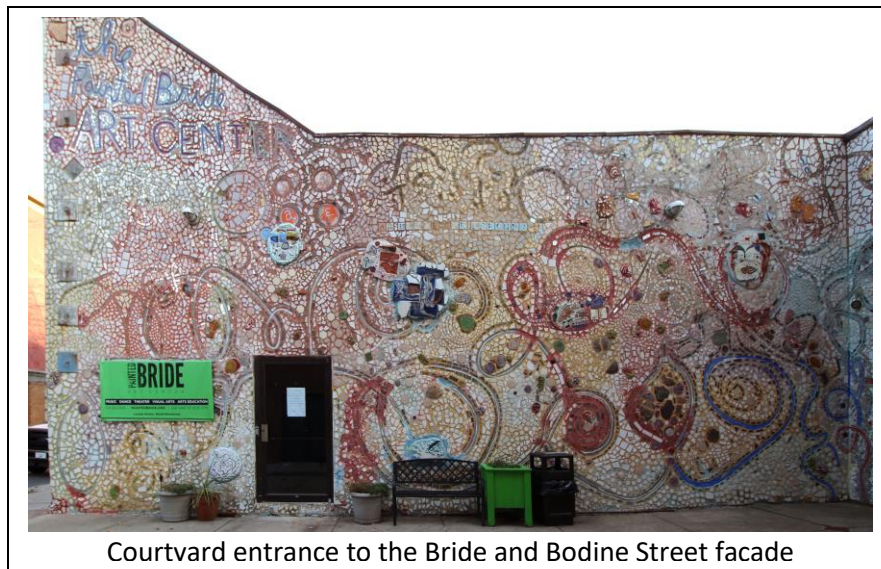


Mark Rothko

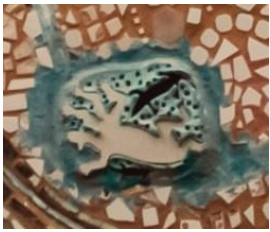
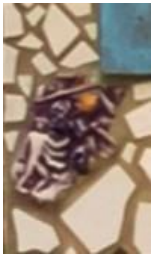
Look at the last round black tile on this section of the wall. In this tile, Isaiah celebrates artists who routinely created self-portraits, including Johannes Vermeer, Albrecht Dürer, Jan van Eyck, Vincent van Gogh, Doménikos Theotokópoulos (El Greco), Paul Gauguin, Milton Avery, Man Ray, and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun.

Isaiah has made, or commissioned, self-portraits in every medium. He often includes self-portraits in his mosaics.





Courtyard entrance to the Bride and Bodine Street facade



Round the corner until you are standing in the courtyard with the glass gallery doors at the far end. At the edge of the wall, find a purple tile at about head height. This figure with four arms and a bowler hat represents Isaiah. There are many versions of this four-armed self-portrait in this wall.

Isaiah says he tiles so fast his arm blurs. Isaiah has a unique method for tiling his mosaics. When he reaches into a bucket of broken tiles, he does not pause to consider what piece he has chosen or where it should go. He tries to work quickly, allowing the process to take over. Earlier self-portraits show Isaiah with six arms, a reference to Hindu iconography and his fascination with Shiva, the god of destruction and transformation.

The bowler hat worn by the four-armed Isaiah is a reference to René Magritte's Son of Man. Bowler hats also serve as traditional headwear in Peru, where Isaiah and Julia served as Peace Corps volunteers when they were newly married. Oftentimes, Isaiah's hat is depicted as yellow - a reference, Isaiah says, to the Man with the Yellow Hat from Curious George stories.

Turn to the right and look above the glass gallery doors. Painted Bride is written in English and Spanish.

In 1991, when Isaiah came back to redo the back hallway with Laurel True, the Bride's custodian asked Isaiah to create a mosaicked Painted Bride sign. Isaiah said he would be happy to, but he really wanted to mosaic the whole building. The custodian said that would be great. Isaiah began right away, arriving onsite early in the morning to start work before anyone else.





Bodine Street façade of the The Skin of the Bride



Fig. 15

Move down Bodine Street. Notice the large mirrored words at the top of the wall, above the first window. In French, d'un rêve means “in a dream.” This is a reference to the work of the Philadelphia artist Gerald Crimmins (1940-2007) who taught at Temple University and Moore College of Art.

In the early '80s, Crimmins created a surrealist land called Reve for his wife, who was bedridden. The land had its own maps, histories, postcards, passports, stamps, visitors guides, government offices, and annual holidays. Isaiah saw this work exhibited and immediately wanted to become a citizen of Reve. He purchased several stamps from the gallery and hoped to buy a passport from Crimmins. With no more passports available, Crimmins issued Isaiah an official Artistic License from the Land of Reve. Reve, like mirrorical, has been included in numerous works by Isaiah.

Under the word Reve, find a ribbon of text written on white tiles. It reads: “In 1970 [sic] the Painted Bride opened in an old wedding dress shop on South Street 1984 the Bride moved to a permanent residence 230 Vine Street.”



To the right of the window, there is a red face with its tongue sticking out. This is one of several life masks included on the Bodine and New Street facades. They were created by Michael Biello.

Biello is a local ceramic sculptor and theater artist who helped revitalize Philadelphia's Old City in the 1970s, and New York's NoHo district in the 1990s. Isaiah has also included his work at Philadelphia's Magic Gardens.





Fig. 18

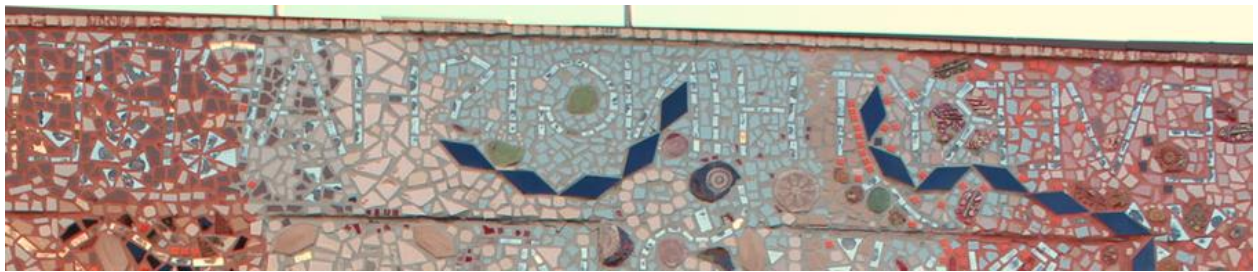
Near the top of the wall, you will find Chinese characters. Isaiah chose these from a book. They represent draw, dream, love, and vehicle.

In 1987, Isaiah did a residency at the College of Fine Arts in Tianjin, China. He learned traditional Chinese brush painting techniques. Tianjin and Philadelphia are sister cities. Chinese characters can also be found at Philadelphia's Magic Gardens on the Kater Street façade.

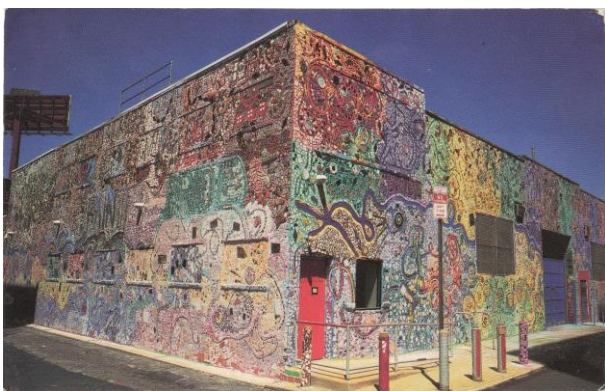
As you approach New Street, look for a long phrase written in mirror at the very top of the Bodine wall. This phrase is written backwards. From right to left, it says: While everything is happening everywhere else.

While walking down South Street on a windy day, a flyer with this phrase stuck to the toe of Isaiah's shoe. The phrase appears often in Isaiah's artwork.

Fig. 19



Stand at the corner of Bodine and New Streets. Look at the photos below and notice how much the murals have changed over time. Isaiah mixes paint pigments into his grout which makes the colors in his mosaics exceptionally vivid. Over time sunlight and weather bleach the colors.



Opening reception postcard for Skin of the Bride, 1993



Isaiah (bottom right) at the back of the Painted Bride Art Center, 2001



The New Street façade of The Skin of the Bride

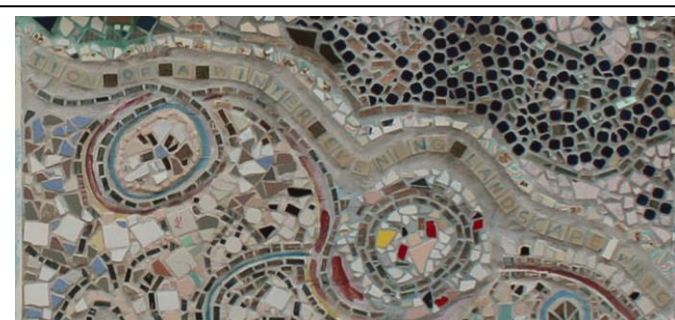
Turn down New Street. These are the first mosaics created on external walls of the Bride. Notice the lack of faces and bodies on this wall.

Find several Marcel Duchamp references:

L.H.O.O.Q. appears above the first window. It is the name of one of Duchamp's "rectified readymades," a found object altered by the artist. L.H.O.O.Q. was a cheap reproduction of the Mona Lisa to which Duchamp added a mustache.

A lengthy quote from Duchamp appears on small white tiles that stretch from one end of this wall to the next. Duchamp describes the creation of his first "readymades." The quote begins: "In 1913, I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn..."

Isaiah began including bicycle wheels in his construction of Philadelphia's Magic Gardens and in his other work after a local bike shop threw a bunch of rims into the garden.



Notice the ceramic duck, above the word Art, near the top of the wall. This is the work of Jorge Wilmot (1928-2012).

Jorge Wilmot was one of the most distinguished and important ceramic artists in Mexico. He is credited with bringing high fire ceramic techniques to the country from Asia. He founded a museum in Tonalá, Mexico, and had a large studio with many apprentices. Isaiah enjoyed a decades-long friendship with him and spent time in his studio. When Wilmot retired, he sent Isaiah hundreds of tiles, the finest of which have been included in all façades of the Bride, including fish, flowers, and butterflies.



The word Art, near the duck, is the beginning of a phrase that stretches to the right edge of the wall. It reads Art is T.C.O.T. Real World. This is a partial acronym. The full acronym often appears in Isaiah's work as AITCOTRW. The full phrase is a core belief for Isaiah: Art is the Center of the Real World.

