

MEDIA & PRESS INFORMATION



Philadelphia's **MAGIC GARDENS**

1020 South Street Philadelphia PA 19147
phillymagicgardens.org | (215) 733-0390

FOR INQUIRIES, CONTACT

Allison Boyle, Events/Marketing Manager, at events@phillymagicgardens.org

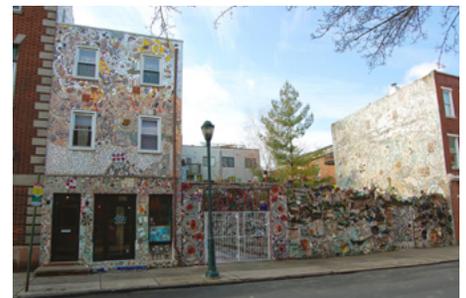


PHILADELPHIA'S MAGIC GARDENS

Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (PMG) is a nonprofit organization that preserves and interprets the artwork of Isaiah Zagar and furthers the legacy of Isaiah and his wife Julia. PMG celebrates art in its many forms through community outreach, public programs, hands-on activities, exhibitions, and tours.

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 environments and his public murals.



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

RALPH CIPRIANO, Philadelphia Inquirer, 1998





ABOUT ISAIAH AND JULIA ZAGAR



House of Mirrors in Woodstock, NY, circa 1963
(photo by Beryl Sokoloff)



Isaiah Zagar in Peru, mid 1960s

Isaiah Zagar (b. 1939 - d. 2026) was born in Philadelphia and raised in Brooklyn. He 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.

Julia (Papiroff) Zagar (born 1940) was born and raised in New York City. She attended Cooper Union School of Art and then received her B.F.A. from the University of the Americas in Mexico City. Her time in Mexico sparked her lifelong interest in Latin American folk art and deep appreciation for Mexican culture.

Isaiah and Julia met in 1963, married three months later, and joined the Peace Corps as conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War. They were stationed in Peru in the Puno region near Lake Titicaca to work with local folk artists. This time set them on a path of collaboration and community that defined the rest of their lives.

When the Zagars returned stateside in 1967, Isaiah experienced a mental health crisis and attempted suicide. In his recovery he taught himself to mosaic. At the same time Julia opened the [Eye's Gallery](#) on South Street.

CONTINUED

The Zagars lived above the store and Isaiah began to embellish the building, creating his first art environment. So began the pair's pursuit that lasted five decades: to find more public and private spaces in order to continue making art.

In the 1970s, the Zagars joined others in transforming their South Street neighborhood. Black activists in that area had worked for years to protest the addition of the Crosstown Expressway that would have eliminated South Street.

This coalition succeeded when the city cancelled the plan in 1974. At the same time, young artists and art students were moving to South Street, opening businesses, and bringing an alternative spirit and prosperity to the neighborhood. This period of artistic rebirth was called the "[South Street Renaissance.](#)"

As Isaiah continued to live with ups and downs in his mental health, he also used mosaic work as therapy. Julia provided stability and supported him with her ideas for new projects and collaborations.



Lead organizer Alice Lipscomb (left) and other activists protesting at City Hall

The couple traveled the world, buying goods for the Eye's Gallery and meeting new artists that Isaiah enjoyed working with. Isaiah embellished his own spaces, including those the family used for homes, studios, and rental properties. He also worked on walls, small and large, throughout Philadelphia and beyond.

For more than 50 years Isaiah created art environments at multiple sites and on more than 200 walls. Julia continued collecting work by new artists in varied art forms, introducing them to generations of Philadelphians at the Eye's Gallery.

In 2023 Isaiah was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. That same year Isaiah and Julia donated the

Magic Gardens Studio to PMG, including artworks stored there. This ensures their legacy and work will be preserved for decades to come.

Towards the end of his life Isaiah no longer worked independently on mosaics, but he did work with PMG's Preservation Team to create new tiles and mosaics with their assistance. The team now follows a preservation plan developed with Isaiah and Julia Zagar to ensure the artwork will never stray from their vision.

In February of 2026 Isaiah died from complications arising from heart failure and Parkinson's Disease. Julia still lives nearby the Magic Gardens Museum on South Street and continues to run the Eye's Gallery.

Isaiah's work is included in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Fabric Workshop and Museum, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, and the Brandywine Workshop and Archives. He received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Isaiah participated in residences in China and India and completed mosaic commissions throughout the United States and internationally.

Julia earned a Master's degree from the University of the Arts (formerly Philadelphia College of Art) in Community Development in 1972. She has led dozens of cultural trips throughout Latin America and India. Julia is an expert on Mexican Folk Art and has taught classes on the subject. She also has arranged for many Mexican folk artists to travel to Philadelphia to teach and participate in residencies. PMG's [Julia Zagar Residency for Women Artists](#) was started in her honor and strives to continue her legacy of supporting artists.

The personal story of Isaiah and Julia is captured in the award-winning 2008 documentary [In A Dream](#) created by their 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.**”





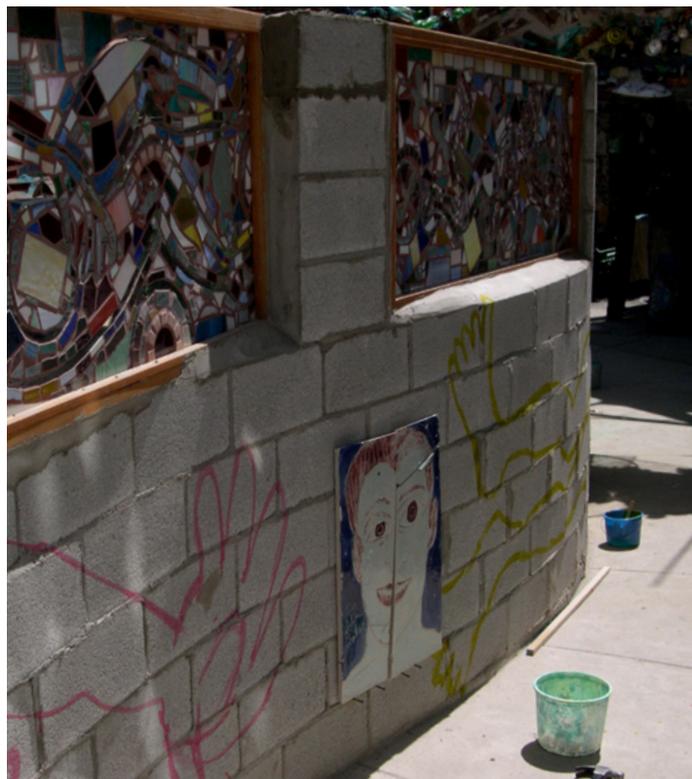
THE MAGIC GARDENS MUSEUM

IN 1986 AND 1995 Isaiah and Julia Zagar purchased two buildings and a lot to be used as Isaiah's studio. At the age of 58, after fully mosaicking those spaces, Isaiah started working on the vacant lots next to their property. He did not own those lots, but nevertheless embellished the fence on South Street and then began sculpting structures out of found objects.

In 2004, the Boston-based owner of the lots discovered Isaiah's installation. He decided to sell the land, calling for the work to be dismantled. Unwilling to witness the art environment's destruction, neighbors, lawyers, and art lovers stepped up to save it. Isaiah's creation quickly became incorporated as a nonprofit organization called Philadelphia's Magic Gardens with the intention of preserving the artwork.

After the organization formed, Isaiah developed the site further. He excavated tunnels and grottos and embellished every surface. The museum is now made up of two indoor galleries and a bi-level outdoor sculpture garden. Isaiah used handmade tiles, bottles, bicycle wheels, mirror, and international Folk Art to chronicle his life and influences. The major structures were complete by 2008, but new work is added as the site changes and grows.

Philadelphia's Magic Gardens now operates independently as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a Board of Directors and paid staff. Visitors can participate in tours, hands-on art experiences, concerts, and more at the Magic Gardens Museum. The Museum also exhibits and cultivates the work of artists locally and internationally while supporting values that include originality, community, and inspiring others..



Construction of a passageway at the Magic Gardens Museum, 2006



THE MAGIC GARDENS STUDIO

IN 2007, Isaiah and Julia Zagar purchased a 2-story warehouse a mile south of the Magic Gardens Museum. The space was intended to house Isaiah's artworks and serve as a new space for him to mosaic. At the age of 68, Isaiah began to transform the cavernous former auto repair shop with his signature mosaics.

Over 14 years he covered both floors of the 10,000 square foot space, including the large elevator meant to hoist cars. On the ground floor Isaiah created walls out of Folk Art, handmade tiles, plates, bottles, and more. Upstairs he stored his artwork and supplies. The building is lit by 14 found object chandeliers by artist [Warren Muller](#), a close friend of the Zagars.

The Zagars gifted the building to Philadelphia's Magic Gardens in December 2023. The organization continues its creative legacy through tours, workshops, and other community programming. PMG's Preservation Team still utilizes the space as a studio: creating tiles and other elements for mosaics, prepping materials, and making repairs to existing work. Resident artists draw inspiration from the space and PMG staff archive paintings, works on paper, and more from throughout Isaiah's career.

OTHER ZAGAR WORK

In addition to these two sites, Isaiah created several other [art environments](#). He mosaicked more than 200 walls, which are listed on our [Mosaic Mural Map](#). The majority are in Philadelphia, but he has murals throughout the United States and in several other countries. Isaiah also created thousands of artworks in other media, including paintings, drawings, prints, and more.



First floor of the Magic Gardens Studio



KEY PROGRAMMING

The Magic Gardens Museum is open to the public for self-guided tours of the permanent mosaic art installation and temporary exhibitions. The Magic Gardens Studio is open for tours, workshops and other programs. 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 guided tours of the Magic Gardens Museum, murals on the surrounding blocks, and the Magic Gardens Studio. 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 at the Magic Gardens Museum that include a live performance, hands-on art activity, and self-guided tours of the space.

ART EXHIBITIONS

Temporary rotating exhibitions in the galleries at the Magic Gardens Museum. These exhibitions 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 various themes found in Zagar's work, including mosaic, folk, and self-taught arts.

WORKSHOPS

Guests have the opportunity to learn new skills in mosaic-making and more with focused workshops. Examples of workshops include creating panel mosaics and glazing ceramic tiles. Workshops take place at both locations, the Magic Gardens Museum and the Magic Gardens Studio.

