

# Kenton Nelson's glass mosaic mural makes its debut as public art in Old Pasadena

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PASADENA – The city's latest piece of public art – an intricate hand-installed glass mosaic mural by Pasadena artist R. Kenton Nelson – is nearing completion 24 feet above ground on a wall in Old Pasadena.

Nelson said he's been working on the process of "interpreting" his distinctive WPA style in three-eighths-inch vitreous glass tiles for the past six years, and he started on the concept of his "Woman with Umbrella" mural about five years ago.

“The image is on 120,000 tiles,” Nelson said Wednesday of the 11 by 14 mural, which is visible from Exchange Alley, North Fair Oaks Avenue, the One Colorado parking structure and the Kendall Alley connection to Union Street.

The woman with the umbrella is based on Eva Fenyes, an artist and arts patron who owned the original building back in the late 1800s and whose former home is now the Pasadena Museum of History.

The technique used has been a long process of trial and error, Nelson said, with early efforts to create glass mural tiles in Italy and Japan ending up bearing “no resemblance to my work.”

It was the inspiration of computer pixels that finally worked, he said.

“They’re pointilism for today,” Nelson said.

Using a computer grid system, and helped by computer expert Niclas Hjelm , Nelson said he was able to reproduce his Depression-era WPA-inspired work closely enough to make the mural “instantly recognizable” as his signature style. There are 86 colors in the palette, and the grout colors are part of the image.

Best known for his distinctive paintings in the social realist school of the 1920s and 1930s, Nelson has a family history in the art of murals.

His great-uncle, Mexican artist and muralist Roberto Montenegro, was a friend and contemporary of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, among others, Nelson said.

“Frida and Diego were married in his back yard,” Nelson said. “And I grew up very close to my grandmother, his little sister.”

The mural is on one of the Old Pasadena buildings owned by Nelson’s close friend and former landlord, Danny Mellinkoff.

Nelson was the first person he thought of for the commission, Mellinkoff said.

“It was a passionate idea of his, and also an act of friendship toward me, to give back to the city that’s been so kind to us over many, many years,” he said. “And I love his work.”

It’s not the first mural Nelson has created for Mellinkoff in the city’s historic downtown.

In the early 1990s, Mellinkoff asked Nelson to paint a mural on an interior wall of the Rite Spot Cafe on Colorado Boulevard.

“I was the landlord there – I still am,” Mellinkoff said. “I was introduced to Kenton, we hit it off, he did the mural and it turned out to be very controversial.”

So controversial was Nelson’s satirical take on city staff and workers that then-city manager Phil Hawkey became enraged and told employees to avoid the Rite Spot, Mellinkoff recalled, laughing. “It backfired, so many people wanted to see it.”

When the Rite Spot became Louise’s Trattoria a few years later, the new tenants decided the mural didn’t fit in with the decor.

“They didn’t want to use the mural, but they promised me, although they covered it, that they would preserve it. I think they did, sort of,” Mellinkoff said. “Most of it is still underneath. But obviously Kenton was really not happy.”

Nelson admits it still rankles “a little.”

“But what are you going to do? You have to move on,” he said.

Nelson said he plans to “still create paintings,” but is interested in using the glass mosaic technique for public art in the future.

“I really want to use this process,” he said. “I worked so hard on it I want to use it again.”