

1998

Common Threads: Broad and Spring Garden Streets. Eight stories high and painted with sharp detail and wonderful whimsy, local muralist Meg Saligman's rendering of 15 city high school students in classical pose is the city's biggest mural, and arguably its masterpiece.

The mural centers on Benjamin Franklin High School student Tameka Jones, in a purple dress and braided hair, who looks out dreamy-eyed from the wall. She is surrounded by 14 fellow students in juxtaposition to an array of classical figurines — a masked Assyrian fertility goddess, a porcelain Dresden lady, a dancing China doll.

The students in their modern dress simulate the figurines in their classical poses. An Italian lady, a Greek soldier, courtesans — all have their modern equivalents in the appealing (and definitely '90s) city kids. One young man with arms intently crossed features low-hung jeans with boxers showing.

"I was trying to bring out the classical beauty of these city kids," said Saligman. "And I was hoping that people would make the connection: The worlds of the figurines and these young people seem so dissimilar, but there are common threads that tie them."

As with most Philadelphia murals, it came into being only through enormous individual dedication, some pleading, politicking, and cajoling. Saligman, creator of several other Philadelphia murals, won highly competitive federal and state grants in 1996, and began searching for the right wall for her vision. She chose the school district's Stevens Administrative Center, with its high brick wall and Broad Street frontage, and was generally well-received.



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At Broad and Spring Garden, a mural of students in classical poses, by local artist Meg Saligman, is the city's biggest.

mural that's interesting to decipher and easy to enjoy.

By chance, Golden was also interested in that wall, and learned from the educators of Saligman's plans. The two decided to join forces, and the Mural Arts Program (now part of the Department of Recreation) ultimately donated \$25,000 to the project. That's a third of the program's yearly budget excluding salary.

Saligman photographed more than 100 high school students in the poses of her figurines, selected the most evocative, and began creating her mural. She broke the work down into 7,500 squares of one foot each and painted them from a grid she carried with her. "When I was up on the wall," she said, "all I needed to know was what square I was on."

All last spring and summer, Saligman and her crew could be seen on scaffolding high up on the wall. They used 210 gallons of special paint and spent almost \$35,000. The results are a classic, a

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