

FULLERTON HERITAGE

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Fox Theatre Art: Italian Renaissance Theme Work of Noted Artist John Gabriel Beckman

While the Fox Fullerton Theatre Foundation was working to save the Fox Theatre, it was discovered that artwork and murals in the auditorium and mezzanine were created by notable artist John Gabriel Beckman. Drawings from the Beckman family also showed that the well-known muralist had designed the Theatre's elaborate stage curtain and panels for the foyer. Most of the media attention has been directed toward restoring the six canvas California history murals designed by Anthony B. Heinsbergen (1894-1991) on the east and west walls of the auditorium, but it is Beckman's classically-inspired artwork that actually complements the Italian Renaissance theme of the Theatre, adding a touch of grandeur and lavishness to the interior. Beckman's artwork for the Fox followed an iconographic decorative scheme designed to match the Italian Renaissance and baroque style of the Theatre. The auditorium ceiling features a repeating floral pattern, the mezzanine ceiling is covered with angels, urns, and classical erotic Greek myth (e.g., Leda and the swan), and the proscenium is decorated with unicorns, Pegasus, and dragons.

Beckman worked as a muralist for only about a decade, and then spent the remainder of his years working as a set designer and art director on



John Gabriel Beckman pictured in his studio

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dozens of motion pictures and television programs. Born in Astoria, Oregon in 1898, where his family practiced medicine, Beckman was raised in San Francisco where he survived the 1906 earthquake and ensuing fires. His parents sent him to Russia to study architecture at the age of 12, but he was too young to qualify for the architectural academy at St. Petersburg, and never received

formal training. Of Russian descent, Beckman sometimes

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Fox Art Designer

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claimed to be related to the last czar and czarina, Nicholas and Alexandra, whom he met while living in Russia. He was forced to return to the United States in 1912 when his mother became ill. His father had booked passage out of England on the *Titanic* for Beckman, but at the urging of friends who told him the new luxury liner was unsafe, Beckman switched to its sister ship, the *Olympic*. He briefly attended the University of California, Berkeley (he later told an interviewer that he was expelled for “asking too many embarrassing questions”), and then worked for a Sacramento architect before moving to Los Angeles in 1920 where he sought work with architectural firms. He then began working for Meyer & Holler, Inc. where he created color schemes, furnishings, wall hangings, and murals. While employed by the design-build firm, Beckman worked on Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre (6712 Hollywood Blvd.), decorated the groin-vaulted lobby ceiling in the Petroleum Building (716 West Olympic Boulevard), restored in the 1980s, created the murals for the Town House Apartments (2959-2973 Wilshire Blvd.), now the Sheraton Town House Hotel overlooking Lafayette Park, and in 1927, headed the design team for the landmark Grauman’s Chinese Theatre (6925 Hollywood Blvd.), the world’s most famous theater.

The Chinese Theatre project led directly to a commission for the Avalon Casino on Santa Catalina Island that turned out to be Beckman’s masterpiece. Seeking inspiration, he rode a glass-bottomed boat around Catalina’s Sugarloaf Point before starting his decoration for the Avalon Theatre, the first theater in the world to be acoustically engineered for sound. He originally intended to do “something” Greek, but instead decided on art deco, coming up with a style that was labeled “Aquarium Deco.” Working with a team of five exemplary artists

(Emil Kosa Jr., Aloyous Bohnen, Vsevolod Ulianoff, Alexander Kiss, and Eugene de Goncz) and dozens of assistants, Beckman began work on the Casino in the autumn of 1928. When they were through, nine colorful murals graced the entrance lobby loggia. In the first floor theater, the audience was surrounded by art deco murals painted on panels. The casino murals, painted on a burlap-like, sound-absorbing fabric—an amazing fantasia of fauna, mermaids, explorers, and other

undersea deities—took three months to complete. Beckman also designed the second-story ballroom with its elaborate ceiling. When the work was finished, the grand opening of the opulent Casino was held Memorial Day, 1929, and Beckman’s reputation was firmly established. Visitors to Catalina Island are still captivated by Beckman’s amazing designs. Later in 1942, he designed the Hollywood Canteen (1451 Cahuenga Blvd.), a club for servicemen visiting Hollywood run by members of the film community.

When the Great Depression dried up his mural commissions, Beckman switched careers and became a set designer for numerous Hollywood films, including *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937),

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Casablanca* (1942), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), and Charlie Chaplin’s highly controversial *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). In the 1950s, he advanced to art direction, serving as art director for such diverse movies as *Calamity Jane* (1953), *Young at Heart* (1955), *The Bad Seed* (1956), *The Helen Morgan Story* (1959), and *Gypsy* (1962). When film production in Hollywood declined, he turned to television where he worked as an art director for numerous television series (*The Partridge Family*, *Cheers*, *Nero Wolfe*). He was still working 14- and 15-hour workdays as the art director of CBS’ popular series *Designing Women* when he passed away at the age of 91 on October 25, 1989 in Sherman Oaks, California.

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President's Corner

by Tom Dalton

How big is too big? With the housing boom we have experienced in Southern California over the past few years, many developers are maximizing their profits by building the largest structures allowable by city code. This has led to many problems in established neighborhoods as older homes are being torn down to make room for these projects. Many times, in an effort to avoid new construction permitting fees, the developer will simply leave one or two walls standing and call the project a remodel. That, by itself, isn't necessarily a bad thing. Most of the problems arise when the structure being built dwarfs the existing homes around it and/or is of an architectural style that clearly is out of character with the neighborhood. Fortunately, Fullerton's General Plan covers this issue in its Land Use section. Policy LU-2.5 states: "Respect and retain the character of existing residential neighborhoods and encourage the establishment of a unique identity in new neighborhoods". It goes on to say, under purpose: "Assure new construction and public improvements in

existing neighborhoods are compatible with the neighborhood's character". Recently, this issue came before the City Council when a developer received approval from the Planning Commission to demolish some modest rental homes on East Amerige and build condominiums. The neighbors appealed the decision and came to the City Council meeting to voice their concerns. We were very pleased that the majority of the City Council members agreed with the neighbors that the project was way out of scale with the existing residences and would have permanently changed the character of this established neighborhood.

Now we have another project that is being pursued on West Valley View that is very similar. A homeowner has plans to tear down his home and replace it with one that is about twice as big. The neighbors are understandably alarmed and have filed an appeal. We hope the City Council will demonstrate the same wisdom as before, hopefully this time with a unanimous decision. Just because a neighborhood isn't protected by Preservation Zone or Landmark District status doesn't mean the homeowners don't deserve the right to be protected from out of control, out of scale development.

Annual Meeting: Year's Accomplishments Reviewed, Jane Reifer Named Preservationist of the Year

Fullerton Heritage held its annual meeting on Sunday, June 26 at the Izaak Walton in Hillcrest Park (now on the National Register of Historic Places).

Fullerton Heritage President Tom Dalton enumerated the organization's accomplishments over the past year, which included:

- > Hillcrest Park on placed on the National Register of Historic places
- > Resource Guide added to FH web site
- > New preservation zone established (Stanford-Whiting)
- > Fullerton College restoring Wilshire School buildings (instead of demolishing)
- > Completion of a pictorial history of Fullerton by board members Cathy Thomas and Debora Richey
- > National Register and Local Landmark plaques on the Williams building

> Local Landmark plaques placed at Fullerton Union High School on Plummer Auditorium, the historic walkway, and science buildings 1 & 2)

> Local Landmark plaques were provided to Villa Del Sol, 1st Lutheran Church, and the Hirigoyen and Edgar Johnson Houses

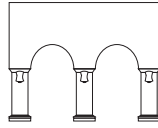
> Co-sponsored the Centennial Ball which raised \$650 for the Fox

> Terry Galvin joined the FH Board of Directors

Dalton also outlined goals for the coming year:

- > Placing the Fox Theatre on the National Register
- > Installing National Register plaques on Hillcrest Park
- > Creating a Preservation Zone workshop
- > Help Golden Hills get Preservation Zone status
- > Help 300-400 W. Brookdale get Preservation Zone status

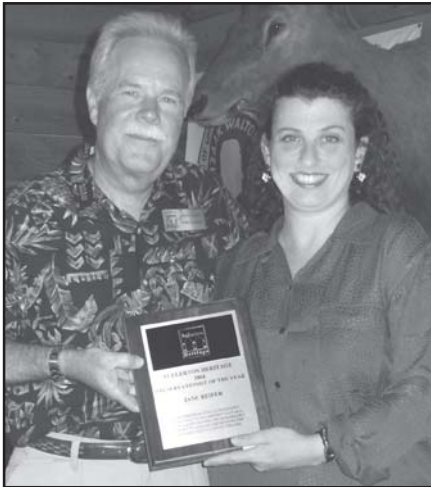
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Annual Meeting

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Fullerton Heritage also used the occasion to present the Preservationist of the Year and the Golden Hammer Award.



Fullerton Heritage President Tom Dalton presents Jane Reifer with the Preservationist of the Year Award

The Award for Preservationist of the Year is given annually to those who have made special efforts to preserve historic Fullerton. This year's honors went to Jane Reifer. Reifer, who served as president of the Fullerton Historical Theatre Foundation, was recognized for her tireless efforts that

led to the purchase of the theatre by the foundation.

Golden Hammer honors this year went to Margaret and Frank Young for their "sweat equity" efforts in the restoration of their historic home. Congratulations!

Consider giving a friend a gift membership in Fullerton Heritage

Yes, I want to support Fullerton Heritage in preserving Fullerton's historic cultural and architectural resources. Please check one:

- \$10 Student
- \$15 Senior (65 & over)
- \$20 Individual
- \$25 Non-profit
- \$30 Family
- \$50 Small Business
- \$100 Friend
- \$250 Corporate
- \$500 Patron
- \$1000 Benefactor
- \$_____Additional Contribution

I would like to be active in Fullerton Heritage, and am interested in the following activities:

- Restoration Resources
- Historic home tours
- Downtown walking tours
- Historic Survey Update
- Other interests (please list): _____
- Advocacy/Issues
- Programs/Education
- Newsletter
- Publications
- Landmark Nominations
- Fundraising

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ ZIP: _____

TELEPHONE (H): _____

(W): _____

E-MAIL/FAX: _____

DATE: _____

- Renewal
- New Member
- Gift Membership

Send your check along with this form to:
Fullerton Heritage / P.O. Box 3356 / Fullerton,
California 92834-3356



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Fullerton Heritage / P.O. Box 3356 Fullerton,
California 92834-3356
Hotline: (714) 740-3051
www.fullertonheritage.org