

The Dreams of Harriet Tubman

By **Mike Alewitz**

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The following remarks were presented before the eventual censorship of the mural project.

WHAT ARE "THE DREAMS OF HARRIET TUBMAN"

The importance of Harriet Tubman's life lies not in the past, but in the future. At a time when African-Americans were kept as chattel, when even the abolitionist forces were riddled with the racism and bigotry of the time, Harriet Tubman and thousands of anti-slavery activists organized an effective liberation struggle which divided and conquered the forces of reaction. Their will to triumph, in the face of tremendous adversity, is an inspiration for those who struggle for social justice today. The Dreams of Harriet Tubman will give visual expression to this great movement, one of the seminal points in American and world history. Dreams will be a necklace of murals painted across Maryland. They will form one unified work.



MOVE OR DIE From THE DREAMS OF HARRIET TUBMAN Project
Portable Mural, Approx. 7' x 21'
Painted at the Museum of Visionary Art, Baltimore/ Based on a censored proposal intended as a major landmark work in the city.

Moses

The murals will be anchored by a dramatic image on a major wall in the city of Baltimore. This mural will depict Harriet Tubman as she was known: Moses. Harriet will be shown parting the seas of reaction, as she did in her life. Her staff is the musket that she carried. The children of Israel are the slave armies who resisted their bondage and joined the union ranks to defeat the south. Among this army will march the freedom fighters of the slave era, like Sojourner Truth and Robert Gould. But the army will also include those of more recent times: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Mumia Abu Jamal and others. Drowning in the tide will be Pharaoh's tribe: the slavers, the KKK, Nazis backward politicians and the other forces of reaction. Harriet's massive skirts will be a quilt of silhouettes formed by tracing the outlines of visitors to the site, who will climb the lower rungs of the scaffold and stand against the wall. In this way the living activists of today will become a part of the mural...literally the body of Harriet Tubman.

Dreams

Throughout her life, Harriet experienced visions or dreams that inspired her actions. At the sides of the mural, and in the smaller walls in other localities will be a series of vignettes based on those visions. At the Harriet Tubman Park in Cambridge, her birthplace, a monument will be specifically constructed. The small mural will depict her birth as a symbolic beginning of the anti-slavery movement as it changed from heroic acts of individual resistance to a mass struggle of liberation. All the murals will contain common visual

elements meant to weave the dreams together. Included in this will be ceramic tile elements created by project volunteers. These tiles will form borders around the painted images, as well as singular pieces within the painted areas. The images will depict some of the important chapters of Harriet's life:

- Her dreams about the Amistad and Nat Turner slave rebellions, which inspired the beginnings of the abolitionist struggle
 - Experience as a slave and a worker, her work with Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists who had a deep understanding the class relationships at play in the war against slavery
 - Her success as a builder and conductor of the Underground Railroad
 - Collaboration with John Brown and his organization for the raid on Harpers Ferry, an event which animated the liberation struggle for decades to come - Leadership as a spy, scout and guerrilla in the military conquest of the south, despite the prejudices against her as both an African-American and a woman
 - Early championing of the women's suffrage movement and participation in the first wave of American feminism
 - Experience as a nurse and educator under radical reconstruction, and the attempt to hold in check the awakened aspirations of black America
- Taken as a whole, *The Dreams of Harriet Tubman* will provide a glimpse of the past and a vision for the future. It will look at the Civil War as the ending of an era and the beginning of the emergence of the United States as a modern nation. It will register the gains for human rights won with the suppression of slavery. It will face with honesty the limitations of that victory and the need to continue the struggle to which Harriet Tubman dedicated her life.

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