



Keith Haring Mural Cut Out of New York Stairwell Heads to Auction

The artwork, at a former youth center owned by a church, faces an uncertain future.

By Nancy Coleman

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For a time, a crucifix hung on the wall of the Grace House lobby. Then, in the early 1980s, something else took its place: the stark black outline of a crawling infant, in thick strokes of paint beaming outward.

In the decades at Grace House, a Catholic youth center on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the image was a tag: Keith Haring was here.

The radiant baby, one of Haring's most recognizable symbols, was the beginning of a three-story mural by the artist, who in one evening painted a dozen more figures dancing up the stairs.

The characters he brought to life were quintessential Haring — the barking dog, a person with a corkscrew torso, conjoined figures with a hole in their shared chest.

"When new kids came to that building and they saw all that stuff, they said, 'Oh my god, this is Keith Haring. Is this real?'" said Gary Mallon, who was the director of the youth center.

But Grace House would eventually close, and the Ascension Church next door — which had leased space to the center — would eventually decide to sell the building. Haring's work has been preserved — sections meticulously cut out of the wall and brought to Bonhams, where they will be auctioned as one work in November.

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But the move has led some, including those charged with safeguarding the artist's legacy since his death in 1990, to ask: Is this right for a piece painted with the youth center's enjoyment in mind?

How High Art Landed in an Old Convent

It started with Paradise Garage, a vibrant but short-lived SoHo nightclub. Haring was a regular. So were some Grace House members, who befriended him at the dance hub and asked him to create something at the center.

Haring came to paint on the same night as a Grace House program. Attendees came to a halt to watch him work.

"He had a can of black paint in his hand and a black, kind of a thick brush, and he just started with that radiant baby on the first floor and then just worked his way up," Mr. Mallon said. "We followed him, and I remember saying, 'Ooh, it's dripping,' and he said, 'That's O.K. It's supposed to drip.'"

Mr. Mallon, then in his early 20s, O.K.'d the mural. He didn't have permission from anyone — mainly, the parish that owned the building.

“I was a nervous wreck because I thought, ‘Oh my God, what’s going to happen when my bosses see this?’” Mr. Mallon said. (The first couple of priests to come by, he added, thankfully didn’t seem to mind.)

Haring incorporated the architecture in the work. The final figure, on the third floor, is cut off mid-torso by the door to what was then Mr. Mallon’s apartment, where it appears to dive headfirst.

“He said to me, ‘That’s you,’” Mr. Mallon said. “‘At the end of the day, when you need to get away from these kids, that one is you.’”

And on the ground floor, a waving figure’s head is actually a plaque commemorating the Grace House founder.

“The murals never were preplanned or sketched out,” said Gil Vazquez, acting director and president of the Keith Haring Foundation. “This particular instance,” he added, “it was just black paint, and away he went. Him and paint.”



Conjoined figures with a hole in their shared chest — and the fire extinguisher sign they were painted next to — in the Haring mural. Bonhams



The radiant baby, one of Haring’s most recognizable symbols, was the beginning of the three-story mural. Bonhams

The Mural’s Next Chapter

The Ascension Church knew several years ago it would have to sell the Grace House building, which had become a residential space. (It is still awaiting a buyer.) There were \$4.5 million in church-related capital improvements to cover — fixing the roof at the Ascension School, making sidewalks more accessible — not to mention general operating costs, said Philip Zeafla, the church’s business manager.

But what about the mural? The building is nearly 90 years old, and any buyer would be likely to do a gut renovation, Mr. Zeafla said.

The church instead spent about \$900,000 to extract it. A conservation and restoration firm, EverGreene Architectural Arts, excavated the 13 figures by cutting out each piece, separating the painted plaster from the heavy terra cotta backing, and hoisting them down from the stairwell to the ground floor. Each weighs up to a thousand pounds.

Haring’s public works have been removed before: A 40,000-pound mural at the Boys’ Club of New York on the Lower East Side was saved from demolition in 2007. The artist himself once painted over his own outdoor mural on the Bowery, which was restored after his death. (Haring has also cut art out of a wall, to preserve a Jean-Michel Basquiat work on the wall of Haring’s studio.)

It's unusual, though, for one of his murals to be sold. The excavation and the church's financial needs played into the decision, Mr. Zeafra said. But he added that the church hopes it will be put on display in a museum, and that part of the sale may go to the Keith Haring Foundation or a cause Haring cared about.

Still, once the piece is sold — Bonhams estimates it at \$3 million to \$5 million — there's no guaranteeing where it will end up.

"We are disappointed," said Mr. Vazquez, of the Haring Foundation.

"This mural was not meant to be owned by a collector," he said. "It was meant to brighten a room full of children."

The silver lining, he added, was that the church recognized its value and preserved it at all — a fact Mr. Mallon finds amusing.

"That church is benefiting from that mural, but they had absolutely nothing to do with it," he said. "At this point it's kind of moot, but it kind of makes me smile."

Touches of Grace House

The mural is being auctioned off as it was in Grace House, with the typical scuffs found on the blocks of any youth center wall. The details can be seen when the mural is on display at Bonhams from Nov. 2 until the auction on Nov. 13.

"They go from being a wall to being almost these sculptural artifacts that have their own kind of intrinsic artistic quality," said Jeff Greene, the chairman and founder of EverGreene.

Along with the paintings, EverGreene saved other pieces that add context. The plaque-headed figure still has its plaque head — and the diving figure on the third floor has his door to dive into.

There are also inked-in additions by Grace House visitors — a pair of eyes and a frown, the expression faded, inside a Haring outline; and a "Hi," etched beside the radiant baby and underlined with a squiggle.

But one important signature is missing: Haring's.

"It would've been ridiculous for him to sign it," Mr. Mallon said. "Everybody knew who he was. We all watched him do it."

Up These Stairs, You Walk With Keith Haring Jan. 28, 2007

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