

## Creative Living

Mario McGee editor/591-2300



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# Images of a city

## Friendship inspires 'Union Street Fresco'

By Brian Lysaght  
staff writer

**R**ICK AND Debby Zuccarini recall that they almost skipped out on the whole arrangement. They got the jitters and considered driving to California.

Instead they arrived at the Union Street tavern in Detroit at the appointed hour and began work as planned on a fresco mural. Artists and curious passersby dropped by the bar that first day.

"The first day was a panic," says Debby Zuccarini.

The following 12 days passed more smoothly as the husband-wife team finished the 7-by-18-foot fresco, he as technician, she as artist. They learned a great deal about technique along the way and were inspired to do more frescos.

The Zuccarinis' work, titled "Union Street Fresco," is a series of images of the city, some easily recognized, others more obscure: gray factories, the Big Dipper constellation, a guiding light of the Underground Railway; "The Lone Ranger" radio show, which originated from a studio a few blocks away on Woodward; Spot, the bar's dog-mascot. Swirling up, down and across the images is a stretch of familiar freeway.

RICK ZUCCARINI and the owners of the bar went to school together. A commercial painter by trade, he painted the building's interior for its new owners. They discussed how to give a Detroit look to the bar, which had a San Francisco air.

The Zuccarinis suggested a fresco and bar owners Tony Balys and Greg Gedda agreed.

Balys and Gedda offered a wall that looks out on Woodward Avenue in a room off the main section of the bar-restaurant. They are also planning an informal, unjudged gallery in the large room. The gallery is scheduled to open Oct. 24.

"We hope to find some good street artists, people who can't show their work anywhere else," said Rick Zuccarini.

HE APPLIED five coats of special lime plaster to the wall. The final two coats — the last coat is mixed finer than the others — were applied and the wall polished in the morning before Debby Zuccarini painted.

They divided the wall into 11 sections and painted one section each day. Timing is important in fresco. The wall must be properly prepared in order for paint to fuse with wall. The paints are a powdery natural pigment mixed with distilled water then ground to proper consistency.

Debby Zuccarini says she painted about six hours each day before the wall became too dry.

Fresco, they say, is difficult and time-consuming, but also rewarding.

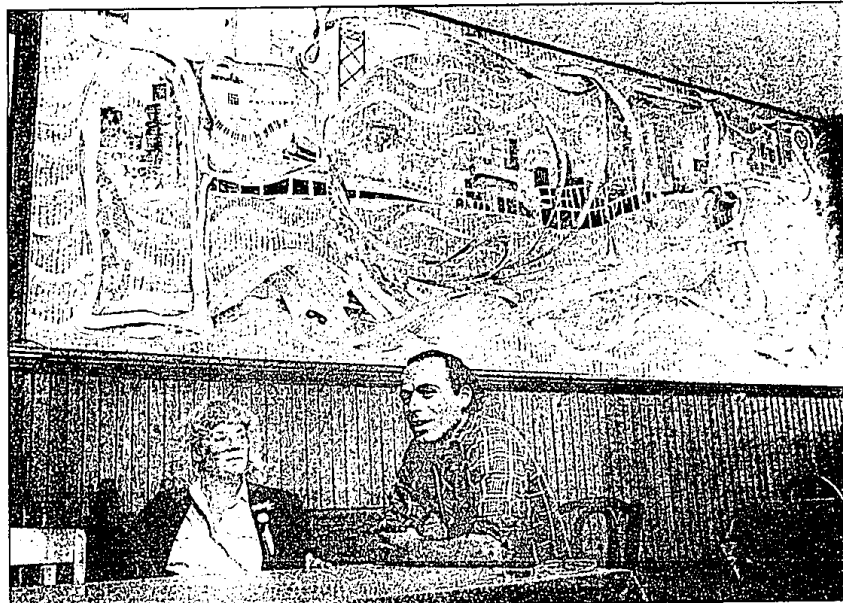
"It's a long hard process," said Debby. "That's why it's not popular. People want immediate things."

FRESCO DATES back as far as 1500 B.C., and was most popular in the United States during the 1930s, when the federal Works Progress Administration commissioned artists to do fresco murals as part of building projects. Many Detroit area post offices built during that era feature frescos.

But the Zuccarinis had difficulty finding written material on fresco. And some of the writing they found was incorrect. Pigments were also difficult to obtain, they say.

They got help from Stephen Pope Dimitroff and Lucienne Bloch, two fresco artists who worked with Diego Rivera on "Detroit Industry" at the Detroit Institute of Arts 55 years ago.

The Zuccarinis, who became interested in fresco after hearing a Dimitroff-Bloch lecture in Detroit, telephoned their mentors when struggling.



The 7-by-18-foot Union Street Fresco features images of Detroit city as seen through eyes of a native artist.

"They were so supportive," said Debby. "They said the only thing we lacked was experience, and the only thing experience gave was confidence."

As a sidelight, the Zuccarinis have been teaching an art class for 7- to 13-year-olds at Oakland Community College, where Debby

works, for four years. The idea, they say, is to teach youngsters the importance of creative thought.

The Union Street, 4145 Woodward, will host an opening for the fresco and gallery Saturday, Oct. 24, beginning at 5 p.m. Phone the tavern at 831-3963.



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Rick and Deb Zuccarini hope to have a flourishing art gallery in the room of the Union Street tavern where they painted a mural.

## 'Detroit' gets a going-over

By Brian Lysaght  
staff writer

She is 78, and she bounds up stairs at the Detroit Institute of Arts two at a time.

He is 77, and says simply fresco is fun.

When Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Pope Dimitroff left Detroit last week, they left behind a newly cleaned treasure.

This husband-wife artist team was hired by the museum to clean Diego Rivera's "Detroit Industry," a fresco they helped create 55 years ago.

In the meantime, they lectured, gave interviews, talked of art and recalled their days with Rivera. They also refired the interest of

some Detroit area artists in the form of fresco.

Bloch and Dimitroff used sponges dipped in buckets of tap water to clean the fresco. Dimitroff said the Kresge Court was at one time the only room in the museum for smokers, and sulfur from the smoke was culprit for most of the grime.

RIVERA PAINTED Dimitroff and Bloch in the Detroit mural. He often painted his helpers.

The mural itself is a tribute to workers, and perhaps a criticism of industrial society.

"He believed the machine controls us, not the other way around," Dimitroff said of the master Mexican muralist. "It's true. Look at the bomb. That's an example."

Dimitroff and Bloch take turns telling stories of the Detroit days of Rivera and Freda Kohl, the artist and wife of Rivera. Both are planning to write their memoirs. Dimitroff wrote a 31-page pamphlet in 1986 titled, "Apprentice to Diego Rivera in Detroit."

Dimitroff said Rivera liked to tell a story, sometimes stretching the truth where necessary. Dimitroff and Bloch would look to Kohl to determine the accuracy of the muralist's stories. If the story was true, she would nod. If untrue she would blink.

Pope and Dimitroff found two pepper seeds stuck to the wall high above the ground as they were cleaning. They recalled that Rivera often ate on the scaffolding as he

painted and loved peppers.

POPE WAS born in Switzerland and met Rivera in New York. She is a painter and sculptor and met Dimitroff in New York. The pair have painted 55 murals, including 18 frescos. On the frescos, he prepares the walls that Pope paints, just as he did with Rivera. Dimitroff was born in Bulgaria but grew up in Flint and worked for a time in an auto factory.

Of their work, he said: "We do this because it's a lot of fun. When we get a fresco, it's pay."

They were invited to teach and create a fresco at California college this month. Their friends in Detroit are trying to organize a show or fresco commission for the pair here in Detroit.



Stephen Dimitroff  
frescos are fun



Lucienne Bloch  
off to California

The Zuccarinis, who became interested in fresco after hearing a Dimitroff-Bloch lecture in Detroit, telephoned their mentors when struggling. 'They were so supportive.'

—Debby Zuccarini