



# The West Wall

A Project of the Walter and Elise Haas Fund

2007-08 COMMISSION: HELPING HANDS

# The West Wall

In 2007, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund inaugurated a project to recognize and support some of the talented artists who have received Creative Work Fund grants. An artist will be commissioned annually to create an original work that can be displayed on the prominent west wall in the Fund's offices at One Lombard Street in San Francisco. At the end of the display period, the Fund will return the artwork to the artist who agrees to donate the artwork to a nonprofit organization of her or his choosing. The Fund's business is philanthropy, and, therefore, the commission emphasizes the idea of giving.

## The First Commission: Helping Hands

Fabric artist Ellen Oppenheimer was the project's first commission. A resident artist at Peralta Elementary School in Oakland when the Fund approached her, she decided to engage the school community in creating a quilt to display at the offices.

Oppenheimer believed it was essential to involve students in all aspects of the work, from inception to completion. She took pictures of the installation space and shared them with the students

*Detail from Helping Hands by artist Ellen Oppenheimer and students from Oakland's Peralta Elementary School. Cover: Installation at the Walter and Elise Haas Fund offices.*

Cover photo and detail by Terry Campbell

so they would have a clear idea of the work's ultimate placement. After much brainstorming with classroom teachers, Oppenheimer began working with the students to make full-scale paper patterns of their ideas, which she brought to the Haas Fund office and installed. Using input from Fund staff and board members and the Peralta Parent group, she and the students decided on the theme, form, and color scheme for the quilted banner display.



*Peralta students work with wax templates of hand tracings — a step in the batik-dyeing process.*

Second- and third-grade students dyed 50 yards of cotton into a rainbow of colors. They traced their hands, made wax templates for batik, and, as a group, tie-dyed strips of fabric. Students from different grade levels produced different tie-dyed colors. Parents and teachers also participated in the dyeing.

The artist and children began with the theme Healing the World, but ultimately chose Helping Hands as their focus

and title. The inclusion of children's handprints in the three quilted banners adds a dynamic quality to a traditional Log Cabin quilt pattern. The children helped to sew the pieces of the quilt together on a sewing machine, and professionals from New Pieces quilt store and gallery in Albany, California, completed the quilting.

Shortly after this project was commissioned, Peralta Elementary School was damaged by an arson fire. Among other losses, many of the children's art supplies

were destroyed. An unanticipated benefit of the Helping Hands project was that it helped the school to restock its valued art supplies. The project exemplified the Peralta Rising spirit — the school's vision for drawing together as a community after the fire.



*Peralta art room displays the banners' color spectrum, dyed on cotton fabric by students.*

Helping Hands was installed at the Walter and Elise Haas Fund's office in July 2007. Enjoyed by the building's many visitors, the project portrays the Fund's commitments to arts education, building community engagement in public schools, and generosity.

## Ellen Oppenheimer

Artist Ellen Oppenheimer has more than 30 years of experience as a quilter and is recognized as one of the most important contemporary quilt makers in the United States. In 1999, the International Quilt Association honored her work by including it in the Twentieth Century's Best American Quilts. Important quilts by her hang in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Arts & Design as well as in the Oakland Museum of California. Her commissions to create numerous public works include banners for the American Embassy in Moscow, and quilts for the Kaiser and Children's hospitals in Oakland. A teacher of ceramics and fabric arts in public schools, Oppenheimer in 2000 received a Creative Work Fund grant to create *Variable Stars*, a collaboration with primary-grade students in Oakland public schools to create quilts for seven branches of the Oakland Public Library.

*Second-grade Peralta students use textile dyes to prepare fabric for Helping Hands. On the wall behind them is a paper quilt mock-up they created on the theme of world peace.*

