

THE PAINTED
SCREENS OF
BALTIMORE

AN URBAN
FOLK ART
REVEALED

ELAINE EFF



UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI — JACKSON

INTRODUCTION

When is a window screen more
than a piece of utilitarian hardware?

When it is also a work of art.

FOR MOST OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, VIVID PAINTINGS HAVE ADORNED window and door screens in Baltimore’s rowhouse neighborhoods. In no other place would a walk down any random street cause passersby to wonder how they had stumbled into an outdoor art gallery. Only in Baltimore is an enticement to enjoy bright landscapes on woven wire window screens simultaneously an invitation and an act of exclusion. The beloved homegrown art form known as “painted screens” was a twentieth-century commonplace found only in this one American city. Painted screens are a gift to the streets. The art is free for the taking, but the show stops there. From inside, the screen is unadorned, the view to the street unobstructed. From the outside, all that’s visible is the artwork. The privacy of rowhouse denizens is guarded by the artists’ handiwork. Painted screens are one community’s way of saying, “Enjoy the view, but keep moving.”

While Baltimore has been the sole preserve of this folk art expression in recent history, a kindred decorative art enjoyed popularity beginning two centuries earlier in London. Both traditions are rooted in the availability of wire and woven cloth, artists’ inclination to embellish any surface, and the need for privacy among homeowners and businesses. The early art form found favor in England, Europe, and Victorian America then seemed to vanish, only to be “invented” anew by William Oktavec (pronounced Ahk-tuh-vek, emphasis on the first syllable), a grocer in Baltimore’s Little Bohemia neighborhood who claimed to be unaware of any precedent.²

OPPOSITE

Tom Lipka, when a senior at Patterson Park High School, painted directly on the slider screen in the window of his family’s South Kenwood Avenue home. *Hans Marx photograph, August 9, 1953. Reprinted with permission of the Baltimore Sun Media Group. All rights reserved.*

This volume examines two threads in the history of painted screens. The narrative of this book is a multitextured warp and weft, moving back and forth between the past and the present; between a popular folk expression of Baltimore and decorative landscape-painted wire cloth found in other cities in America and abroad; between fabrication techniques first of wire then of new-age materials. It is related in two voices—the colloquial speech of the people and the facts and observations of the folklore scholar.

Though the historic and the Baltimore versions of painted screens are linked by similar materials, function, and technique, they exist as distinct expressions among different geographic and socioeconomic milieus. Similarly, late-twentieth-century inventions adapt the concept of one-way optics, applying modern materials and technology to new surfaces. Buildings, vehicles, transit and tour buses, scaffold covers for construction projects, and advertising media remind us how little is new, how a good idea survives over time, and how art forms evolve to keep up with advances in media and the demands of the marketplace. It also suggests that the one-way scrim applied to transparent surfaces is an example of polygenesis, the same idea emerging independently in multiple times and venues.

Variouly known as painted blinds, landscape screens, painted screens, and more recently seen as patterned frit glass for window walls, billboards, or window graphics, the many approaches to transparency and one-way surfaces offer a surprising enhancement to everyday life and a glimpse into the creative spirit.

In Baltimore, painted screens are iconic. We have claimed them as our own for a century, in times of plenty and in times of scarcity. From a single screen that started the trend in 1913 to the glory days when tens of thousands of similarly themed scenes dazzled rowhouse windows and doors, they have sent a vibrant message of neighborliness to strangers and friends alike. What few people know, however, is that painted screens share a long and fascinating lineage abroad and in America.

In large part, the surprising associations of landscape painted screens' roots in eighteenth-century England and Victorian Europe and America parallel my own discoveries. Unearthing an early example led me right back to Baltimore and ultimately to this book. Since their twentieth-century Baltimore debut, painted screens have ridden a rollercoaster of appreciation and disdain. Beloved or reviled, they have been embraced by the city's urban rowhouse dwellers as surely as the sidewalk

runs alongside the front window. I caught up to them at a time when they were recoiling from the tug of war between window air conditioners and the arrival of vinyl as the newest must-have material for replacement windows and door frames.

Painted screens are my Rosebud. I literally stumbled over them enough times that I could not help but submit to them. I never imagined I might stake my career on learning their story and sharing it with a larger audience.

My journey began when I left for graduate school, detouring from a career in law to study folk art in Cooperstown, New York. As the door to the Volkswagen van containing all my worldly possessions slid shut in a suburban Baltimore driveway, my mother queried, "Folk art? Is that like the painted screens of Baltimore?" I shrugged my shoulders, climbed behind the wheel, and headed north. Hours later I was enjoying a welcome beverage in the parlor of Louis Jones, the gentleman scholar who would become my mentor in folk art. He registered delight that a Baltimorean was sitting before him, one who might finally address his questions about that city's famed painted screens. Barely three weeks later I was toiling in the basement art storage collections of the New York State Historical Association. My job was to separate paintings from their frames, the curatorial vogue at the time. I spied a pair of misplaced artifacts. What were aged wood-framed window screens doing among the artworks? As I tilted the surface to catch the light, I noticed faded monochromatic landscape scenes on the finely woven mesh.

The catalog cards revealed that I had unearthed two late-nineteenth-century landscape screens from nearby Fort Plain, New York—no artist, no provenance. Spinning origin theories in my head—same form, earlier time, different place—I hopped into my less-than-trusty VW van and headed back down the highway, straight to northeast Baltimore and the Oktavec Art Shop, established 1922. This was in the autumn of 1974—the first of many miles in a journey that would bring people, place, and tradition in closer focus through a single creative object native to my hometown.

The research for this book was indeed more than half the fun. Meeting the screen painters, one by one, was like peeling and savoring the history embedded in the layers of wallpaper, paint, and paneling in a city rowhouse, each one more vividly patterned and unanticipated than the next. And around every corner I found an outdoor museum whose creator or curator lived just behind each street-front gallery.



A pair of fine-meshed, late-nineteenth-century, monochromatic landscape screens from a stately home in Fort Plain, New York, after 1875. *Collection of the New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown.*

When screens came into my life that first year, they were very much a part of the urban fabric of daily life in Baltimore. From the eastern reaches of the county line at Dundalk to Morrell Park in the west, from Little Bohemia in the north to the harbor in the south, attached homes' eyes on the world were covered in vibrant landscapes. Classified ads in daily and weekly papers, flyers, and hardware store window displays offered an array of artists from whom to choose.

My search was interrupted by stints in Philadelphia pursuing a doctorate in folklore and a mission to the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery to unearth a world of folk art stored in dark cubbies and basements of the "nation's attic." While I was investigating other peoples' art for a major exhibition, the news came that Richard Oktavec, tradition bearer of screen painting's first family, had died, leaving a fifteen-year-old son at home and unfinished work on his easel. I realized at that moment, six years into my career as a folklorist, that other people's exhibitions could be done by others, but Baltimore's painters and screens needed a chronicler before another generation perished.

It could not have been a better time to go home. In 1980 the city's inferiority complex was lifting with the shared excitement of the gleaming new Harborplace, the festival marketplace created by local visionary James Rouse on the previously invisible working waterfront. Pride of place was being restored by a mayor who wanted everyone to love Baltimore. As the city's number-one booster, William Donald Schaefer valued people, neighborhoods, creative solutions, and getting the job done. Screens and opportunities to showcase them and their makers figured on his list.

A year of dedicated fieldwork sponsored by the Baltimore Museum of Art allowed me to search for screens and named painters on two fronts—Baltimore in real time and the rest of the world in previous centuries. At home, all I needed to do was peer at a window and obliging neighbors proudly shared all they knew about these objects of mutual affection. Women of a certain age would tell you exactly who painted their screens or, at minimum, where he worked, what equipment he carried, and how he dressed. The men would relate vivid stories of sidewalk artists going house to house, street to street, on foot or by car, painting every door and window screen, front and back, for the mere price of a growler of beer. All agreed, "They used to be everywhere. Everyone had them."



Painted signs like this Sunbeam Bread advertisement on the door of Thomas' Grocery in Savannah, Georgia, could be found on screen doors of country stores and urban markets nationwide well into the 1960s. The more durable rubberized decals that replaced them lacked both the craftsmanship and the benefits of ventilation of the painted screens. *Author photograph, 1981.*

By all accounts, a painting on wire should be an ephemeral work of art. And in many locations this would be the case. "How long do they last?" is the most frequently asked question. If well executed, the painting might outlive the screen itself. Cars became ubiquitous but their exhaust was not corrosive enough to cause serious damage, except on bus and truck routes where fumes caused considerable damage if screens were not cared for properly—removed, cleaned, stored, and replaced seasonally.



Haywood House or Cerro Gordo, as it was known in its Victorian era glory days, was a seaside boardinghouse in southern New Hampshire's New Castle-by-the-Sea, circa 1890. Landscape painted half screens, including the one to the left, were installed on every window to enhance guests' privacy.
Courtesy Douglas R. and Geraldine H. Woodward.



Nothing was spared when Sanford "Sam" Darling painted every surface of his Santa Barbara, California, bungalow, with scenes recalled from his travels by tramp steamer. *Courtesy Michael E. Bell and John Turner, 1978.*

Efforts to track down painted screens farther afield took me throughout the United States. The weather may be hot and humid in Baltimore, but it was not as oppressive as in the Deep South where the heat and humidity tended to destroy the wire. In Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, the trail grew colder as the temperature and moisture soared and it became painfully clear that landscape screens did not survive southern summers. No amount of probing turned up any survivals other than the famously flapping mid-twentieth-century rusted screen doors of country stores and corner groceries. They held on longest to the highly visible bread and soda ads supplied by distributors and hinged to well-trafficked, well-worn entrances.

A strategically placed advertisement in New England's revered *Yankee* magazine yielded a bonanza of memories and surviving screens in cities, villages, and remote rural areas. I tracked down every one—and was stunned by each nineteenth-century monochromatic landscape screen I saw and touched. The fragile, finely woven wire cloth was as alluring as the depictions of sturdy castles, fortresses, and bridges with lakes and strolling couples—no two identical, but remarkably similar (See APPENDIX B, *Recollections of Screens Past*, page 231).

The original windows of a stunning Victorian brownstone residence in Charlestown, Massachusetts, now an attorney's office, still held their solid mahogany-framed landscape screens.³ An elderly woman conjured up World War I memories of “the times I would go to the 17th of June Parades in [Charlestown] on Bunker Hill Street. As I walked along the sidewalk the houses flush with the street would have windows at eye level and I remember the screens with painted scenes on them.”⁴

Haywood House, or Cerro Gordo was a seaside boardinghouse in southern New Hampshire's Victorian playground, New Castle-by-the-Sea. Over the years, the simple vernacular one-story guest house was transformed by a riot of additions, porches, and bays, and walnut-framed painted screens were a fixture on every window. They not only protected the guests from prying eyes, but allowed ocean breezes into every room and kept pesky insects out.⁵ Several landscape screens were salvaged from first-floor medical offices in Connecticut, and one from circa 1915, Springfield, Massachusetts, featured a life-like “short haired dog... a little like the RCA Victor dog... in a seated position and looking out toward the street.”⁶

Throughout the country, random examples of more recent vintage were brought to my attention. Sanford “Sam” Darling, an eccentric homeowner, attached his paintings of exotic locales to the house's walls and continued to paint every exterior surface of his Santa Barbara, California, bungalow—screens included. On the East Coast, everyone who traveled the seaside route seemed to know the house in Beverly, Massachusetts, with primitive painted screens and the nearby Youngman mansion in Manchester, now a private school, that still had its monochromatic landscape screens intact.

By the time I took to the streets of Baltimore to trace the routes of the city's rowhouse Rembrandts and tease out their identities and signature works, screens were on another of their cyclical downturns. Old-timers had put away their brushes and paints, certain their days of plenty had passed. Senior center habitués offered up names of once-anonymous artists of prodigious output. Vivid descriptions of a harmonica-playing itinerant filled in blanks and linked at least one longtime painter to his unknown mentor. The attention brought several painters out of retirement and a resurgence of the local art was afoot.

One by one the artists and their patrons shared their stories and their secrets, carrying on the lineage directly from William Oktavec to his neighbors and sons and imitators to his grandson, John, who is still active today. John Oktavec is as likely to complete a commission for a scene of an imagined cosmos for a beauty salon door in gentrified Canton as he is to render his own version of his grandfather's time-tested red bungalow for a neighbor. He might be found at an art fair alongside Anna Pasqualucci, a committed screen painter for the twenty-first century who cherishes her chosen art form's past as dearly as she anticipates its future.

The screen painters of Baltimore fashioned their legacy from paint on wire. The next generation will carry on in the medium of its day with subjects it deems apropos. The urge to create is ever present. Standards of beauty are always in flux. The rowhouses of Baltimore are here to stay. Likewise, painted screens go back a long way. Their story begins here.

PAINTED SCREENS OF BALTIMORE

HISTORIC & CONTEMPORARY SITES

This map shares sites and landmarks associated with screen painting primarily throughout East Baltimore. Some are historic. Others are contemporary. Together they tell the story of 100 years of painted screens.

LITTLE BOHEMIA / MIDDLE EAST

- Oktavec Grocery & home, 847 N Collington
- St. Wenceslaus, Ashland & N Collington
- St. Wenceslaus School (now MICAPlace)
- Slavie Savings & Loan, N Collington & Madison
- Northeast Market
- Oktavec Art Shop, 2409 E Monument
- Johnny Eck home/future museum, 622 N Milton
- Ruth Chrysam (Fahey) home, 141 N Montford
- Joe Sconga home, 801 N Chester
- Frank Deoms home, 2426 Ashland
- William Oktavec home, 906 N Luzerne
- Al Oktavec home, 611 N Luzerne
- Richard & John Oktavec home, 613 N Glover
- Ted Richardson home, 526 N Potomac
- Leroy Bennett home, 535 N Potomac

HIGHLANDTOWN

- Frank Abremski home, 136 N Ellwood
- St. Elizabeth of Hungary
- Pagoda
- St. Michael's Catholic Ukrainian
- Patterson Theater, 400 block S East Ave, Eastern Ave. 2nd floor windows
- Haussner's Restaurant
- Monica Broere studio, 422 S Highland

- Our Lady of Pompei
- Southeast Anchor Library
- Highlandtown Healthy Living Center
- Sacred Heart of Jesus
- National Brewery

CANTON

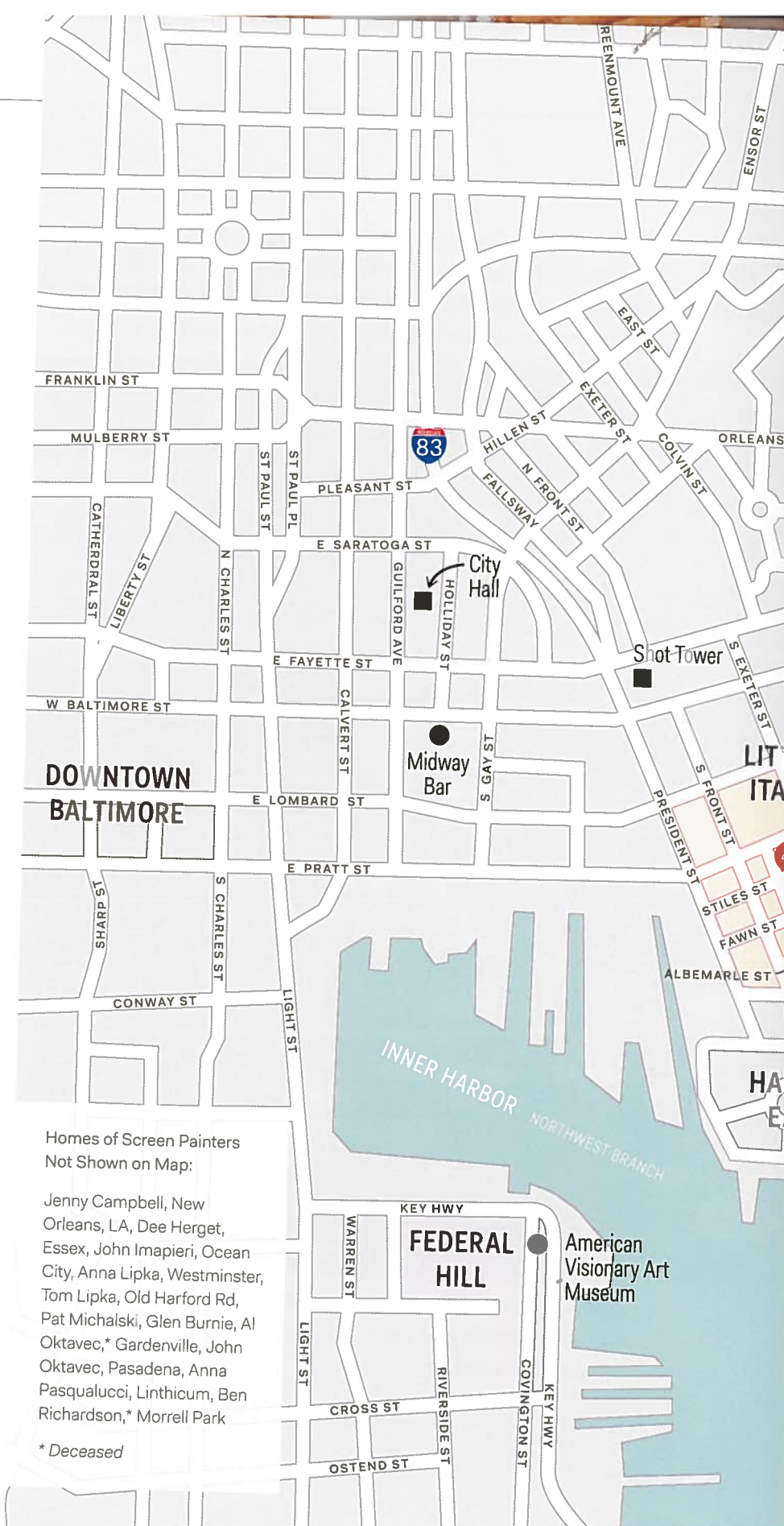
- Former Beeche's Tavern, Elliott at S Clinton
- Kozmic Scizzors, 1200 S Clinton
- Elliott Street
- Enoch Pratt Free Library, Canton Branch
- O'Donnell Square
- Alonzo Parks home, 933 S Linwood
- Hatton Senior Center
- Betty Piskor home, 2903 Fait Ave
- Lil Sims / Lipka Family home, 832 S Kenwood
- St. Casimir Catholic

FELLS POINT

- Boston Street
- Ted Richardson shop
- Holy Rosary
- Charles Bowman home & studio / Darlene Grubb studio / 1813-15 Fleet
- "Lady Day Way," 200 block S Durham
- St. Stanislaus Kostka
- Thames Street
- Broadway Market

LITTLE ITALY

- St. Leo's
- Frank Cipolloni home, 239 S Albemarle
- Bocce courts



Homes of Screen Painters
Not Shown on Map:

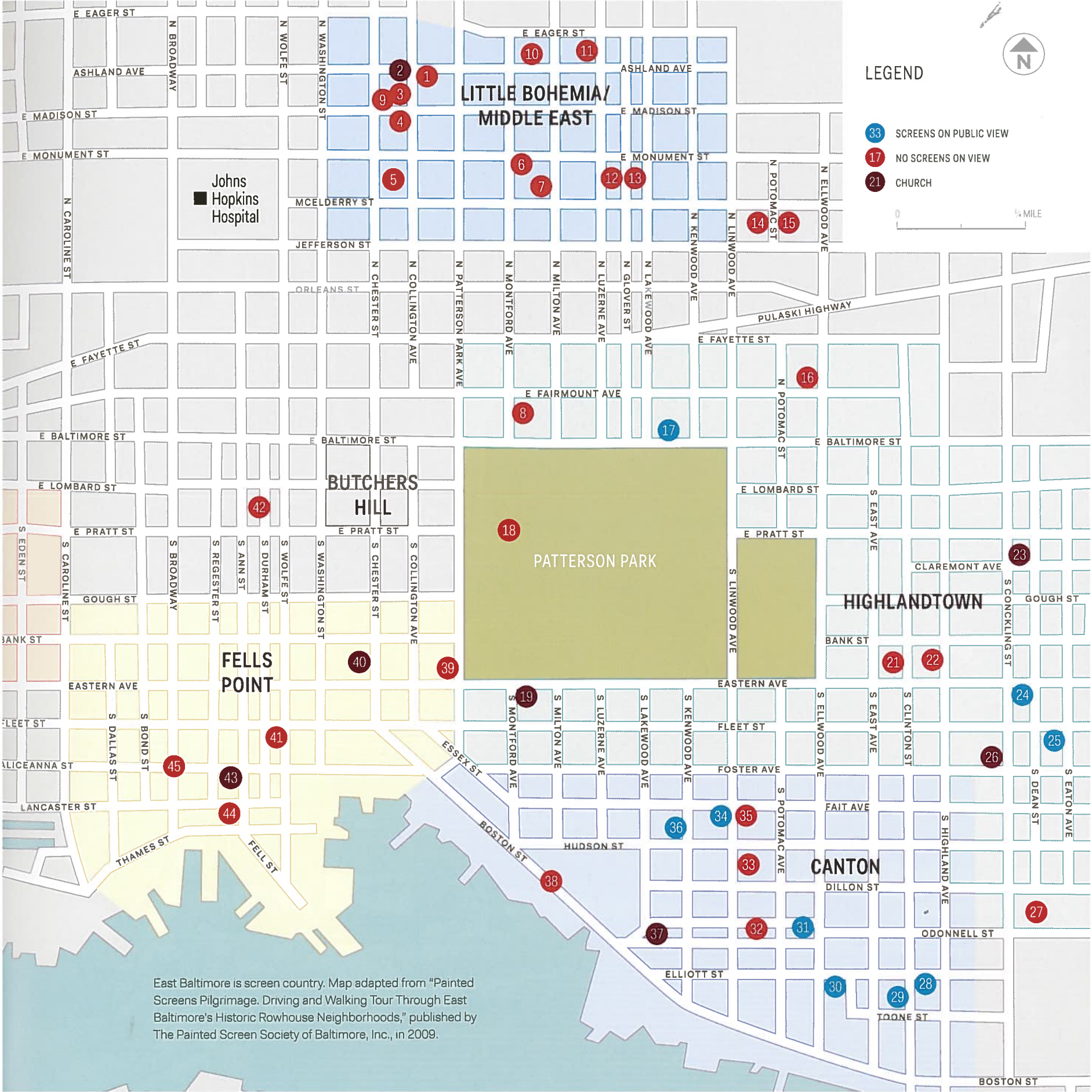
Jenny Campbell, New Orleans, LA, Dee Herget, Essex, John Imapieri, Ocean City, Anna Lipka, Westminster, Tom Lipka, Old Harford Rd, Pat Michalski, Glen Burnie, Al Oktavec,* Gardenville, John Oktavec, Pasadena, Anna Pasqualucci, Linthicum, Ben Richardson,* Morrell Park

* Deceased



LEGEND

- 33 SCREENS ON PUBLIC VIEW
- 17 NO SCREENS ON VIEW
- 21 CHURCH



East Baltimore is screen country. Map adapted from "Painted Screens Pilgrimage. Driving and Walking Tour Through East Baltimore's Historic Rowhouse Neighborhoods," published by The Painted Screen Society of Baltimore, Inc., in 2009.

Johns Hopkins Hospital

BUTCHERS HILL

PATTERSON PARK

FELL'S POINT

HIGHLANDTOWN

CANTON

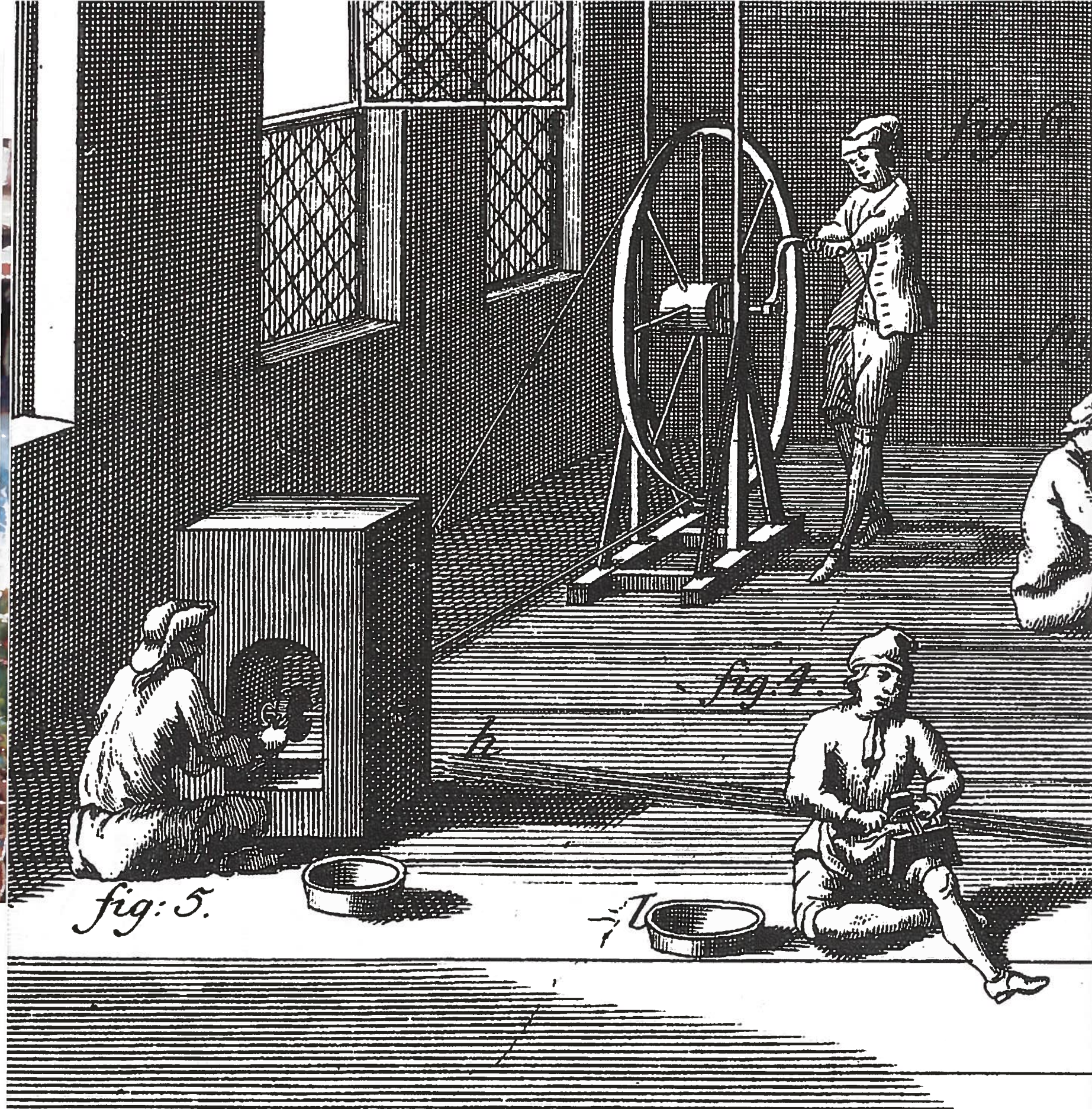
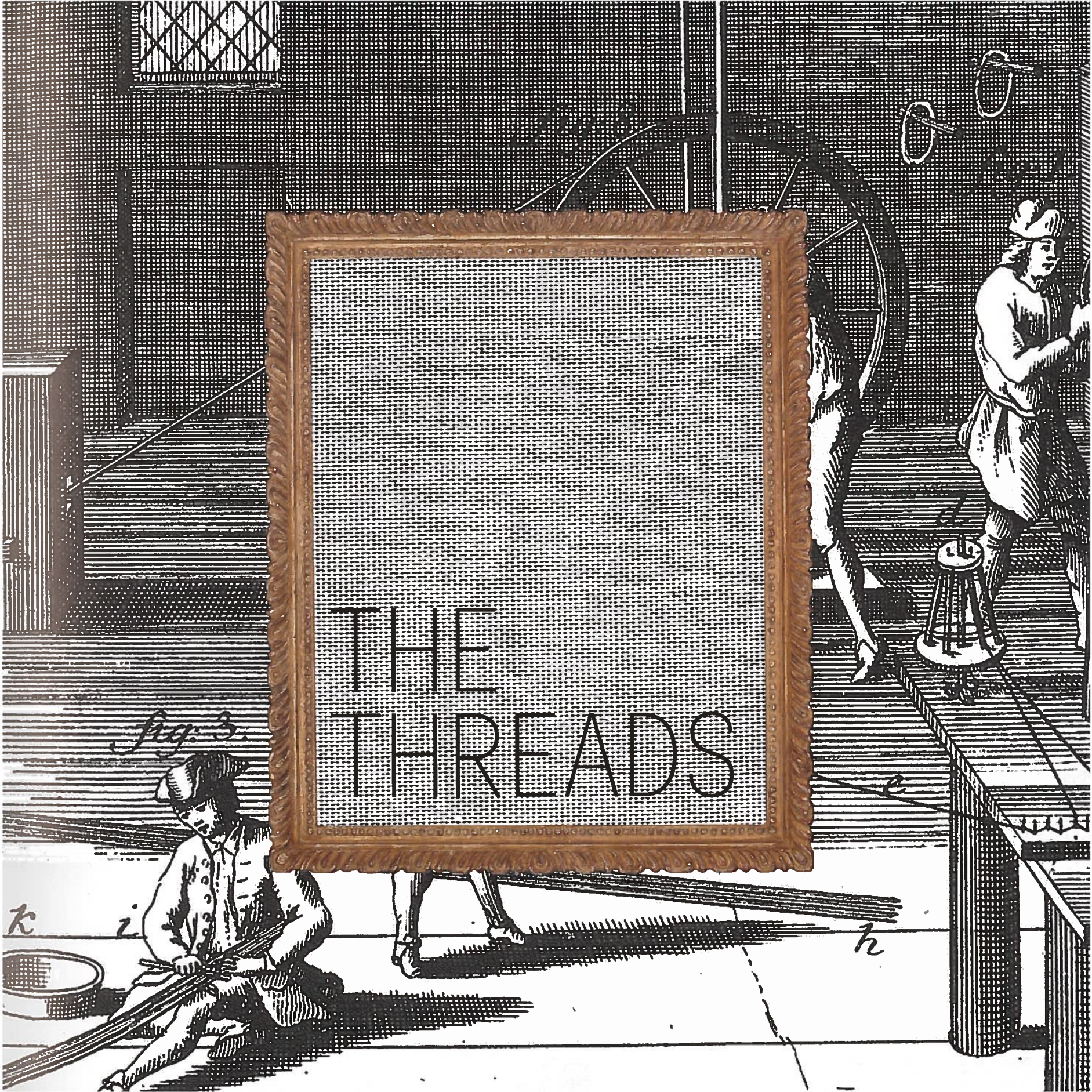


fig. 5.

fig. 4.



THE
THREADS


Fig. 3.

k

i

h

e



A BALTIMORE

TRADITION



The Marski family and neighbors celebrate the Fourth of July in their Highlandtown backyard. The tradition lasted for decades and expanded to include the entire block on both sides of the alley. Photograph by Linda G. Rich, circa 1979, *The East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project*. Accession Number P83-11-063. Courtesy of the *Photography Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County*.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1913, AN ENTERPRISING GROCER MOMENTARILY EXCHANGED HIS butcher's apron for paint and brushes. His intention was strictly commercial—the act of replicating the produce and meats sold in his shop on his screen door attracted the attention of nearby residents. He called it advertising. They considered it art. In an instant, “William Oktavec the Grocer” became “William Oktavec the Artist.”

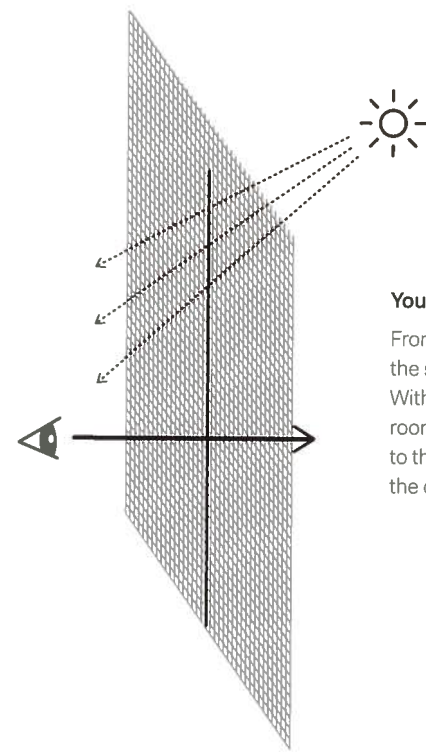
The sidewalk art critics appreciated the lifelike quality of Oktavec's original rendering. But they appreciated the colorful distraction even more when they realized that they could not see inside his store, while from indoors they could see unimpeded out to the street. Flying insects stayed out. Breezes passed through. Neighbors soon requested screens by the houseful—for doors and windows, upstairs and down, front and back, block after block. Oktavec redefined the humdrum function of woven wire fly screen by treating it like a canvas with holes. The useful was made beautiful. His invention spread from rowhouse to rowhouse with lightning speed, like a juicy tidbit of gossip passed over the backyard fence.

Over time, painted screens transformed parts of Baltimore into outdoor art galleries. They were a trademark feature of the city's rowhouse neighborhoods for almost a century. Only the signature white marble steps were a more widespread and permanent presence in the rowhouse landscape. With a few brush strokes, an urban folk art was born.

In short order, demand far exceeded the good grocer's ability to supply his growing client base. Seeing there was money to be made in painted screens, amateurs and sign painters with artistic inclinations and an itch for a quick buck, joined the ranks of dabblers and handymen who called themselves "screen painters." Most started at home with their own screens and, finding approval, gradually expanded their territory. Oktavec's students and imitators plied their trade from backyards, basements, and even a shop or two. Itinerants with beer boxes for seats, easels, and paint cans took to the street corners to drum up business.

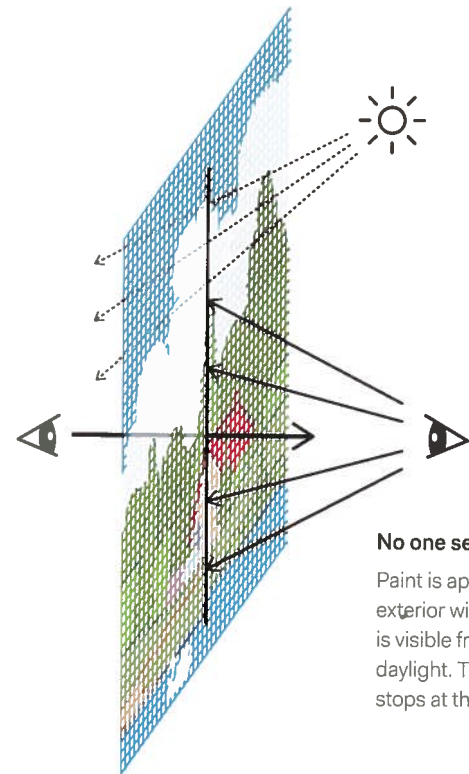
By the time Oktavec closed his grocery, opened an art shop, and became a full-time artist, a profusion of painted screens by many hands overlooked the sidewalks of East Baltimore. The number of painters swelled and contracted over the decades, as did the number of screens. When the art form reached its zenith in midcentury, few windows had escaped adornment. Success in this itinerant trade was consumer driven. The painters sought little more than the cost of paint, brushes, or a cold drink. Their talents varied, as did their fees and the durability of their work. The master grocer-painter set a high standard, but beauty was in the eye of the beholder. The price—affordable to the people of the neighborhood, inexpensive enough so they could cover every window in the house—sealed the new icon's status as a people's art.

As for durability, some painted screens have lasted for decades, depending on location and care. Direct sunlight and exhaust from trucks and buses took a toll. The rise of air conditioners threatened to eliminate them. The call to arms disrupted the trade for prolonged periods, but postwar nesting was especially favorable to the rise of new artists and fluorescence of the art. The introduction of new window styles and materials every decade made replacement windows increasingly desirable and provided a convenient excuse to order new screen paintings. With every innovation, the old screens made their way to the basement for safekeeping or into the alley trash bins. Yet the unabated need for privacy from the adjacent sidewalk, and, later, nostalgia for a neighborhood tradition, continued to keep painted screens firmly affixed to Baltimore windows.



You see out.

From the inside looking out, the screen is transparent. With illumination inside the room, the eye goes directly to the light source, voiding the one-way effect.



No one sees in.

Paint is applied only to the exterior wire mesh. Picture is visible from outside during daylight. The viewer's eye stops at the painted image.



James Soul took up screen painting in the 1960s and painted for his neighbors in the backyard of his North Belnord Avenue home. *Courtesy of Delores and Veronika Soul.*



Tom Lipka began painting screens from his family's Canton home as a young boy. His career spanned six decades, with occasional time off for service in the military, work, and to raise a family. *Author photograph, 1982.*

THE PAINTED SCREENS OF BALTIMORE WERE NOT ART FOR art's sake, but a practical amenity for a densely built man-made environment. Although they are a feast for the eyes, they are made for immediate and everyday use. The screens have meaning and logic because of their physical context. They are an integral part of the architectural infrastructure, a product of place.

As an art form, painted screens succeeded due to the overwhelming presence of rowhouses, an architectural style built to provide comfortable dwellings for Baltimore's laboring and middle classes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. The city's relentless profile of attached two- and three-story brick façades filled contiguous blocks as far as the eye could see. These regimented house fronts provided a perfect exhibition venue with a built-in audience.

European immigrants flocked to the communities of affordable homes where familiar institutions, jobs, and their countrymen welcomed them. In East Baltimore in particular, Germans, Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians, Irish, and Italians clustered in self-imposed, church-centered enclaves. Their homes, more often purchased than rented, were their proudest possessions.

Whether situated on the main street or on a narrow alley street, Baltimore's rowhouses share basic characteristics, especially in relation to the outdoors. There is no barrier between the front window and the sidewalk. No porches, no grassy buffers, no lawns, no fences, no gardens define the exterior space. Double-hung sash windows dominate the structure and provide light, air, and views. Because of its dominant position, the first-floor window is the mediator of home life and street life. In many cases, the Baltimore rowhouse has more square footage dedicated to glazing than to actual brick and mortar. With shutters open or curtains or blinds drawn back for air or light, the front parlor, in particular, is fully exposed to the street. From within, the window offers an unobstructed view.

The window screen, a late addition to the workingman's home, and at first purely seasonal, was contemporary with Mr. Oktavec's innovation. Nowhere but in East Baltimore was the urge to embellish that screen so irresistible. As objects made, above all, for use by untrained, self-taught artists, they are an authentic folk art, of, by, and for the community in which they are found. Since Oktavec painted his first screen a hundred years ago at the behest of his next-door neighbor, Mrs. Emma Schott, they have been designed, produced, and consumed within the rowhouse communities of Baltimore.⁸ They are valued for their utility, but experienced as art.

A community is both a physical, tangible location and a group of people sharing a common experience. Painted screens have long defined and provided a source of identity for residents of East Baltimore.



OPPOSITE

Young Bohemian photographer John Dubas proudly posed his family members inside and outside their newly built rowhouse at 917 North Bradford Street. *Photograph by John Dubas, 1907, Arthur U. Hooper Memorial Collection, Baltimore City Life Museum Collection, Maryland Historical Society, MC9077-2.*

BELOW

Stoop sitting residents of South Decker Ave. near Patterson Park enjoy the familiar Red Bungalow screens by Alonzo Parks on all of their windows. *Jack Engleman Studio, August 1953.*



As Upper Fell's Point resident and proud owner of numerous painted screens Estelle Figinski noted, "I can't do it. You can't do it. It must be art."⁹ One of Baltimore's best-known tastemakers, John Waters, agrees, observing, in an interview for the 1988 film, *The Screen Painters*:

What amazed me is how cheap they are. That is the thing I can't believe, and nobody takes them seriously. If they would make their price a thousand dollars they would be written up in *The New York Times*. But because they are thirty dollars, people say, "They can't be art."¹⁰

Although today their rarity relegates painted screens to the realm of the quirky or even kitsch, three generations of eastsiders "grew up and got old seeing painted screens as something usual."¹¹ Painting colorful scenes on window and door screens was a summer ritual in the rowhouse neighborhoods of East Baltimore through most of the twentieth century. They were as much a part of the hot weather landscape as the brick and Formstone rowhouse façades, the white marble steps, and corner taverns and confectionaries. They were as familiar as the calls of the once-omnipresent Arabbers (pronounced A-rabbers, emphasis on the first syllable), the local term for produce vendors working from horse-drawn

carts, as popular as sidewalk snowball stands selling cones of crushed ice and syrup refreshment. They were far more evident than the intermittent flowering trees rising from patches of earth carved from the curbside concrete. They provided a comforting predictable presence and offered the perfect backdrop for the camaraderie shared among neighbors escaping from the heat by sitting out on their stoops on summer evenings.