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ARTS

Milwaukee artist Muneer Bahauddeen embraced public art, teaching youths



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Key Points

Bahauddeen was known for his large-scale ceramic tile murals and for teaching art to young people in the community.

He created the "Peace Post" project, a series of community art installations featuring messages of goodwill on ceramic tiles.

Evelyn Patricia Terry struggled when she was asked to describe [Muneer Bahauddeen](#) as an artist.

“Amazing?” Terry asked. “Amazing is so trite, though. It is just a little word. Wonderful is the wrong word, too.”

Then one of Bahauddeen's works came to mind – a large mural of a straightening comb. The piece, Terry said, is visually significant because he filled the surface of the paper with tiny intentional marks.

She finally settled on describing her friend and fellow Milwaukee artist's work as "complicated" and "in-depth."

Bahauddeen, 77, a beloved and – to many – underappreciated muralist and ceramicist, was found dead on April 29 in his apartment. A icon in Milwaukee's Washington Park neighborhood, he was known for his public art and community teaching, and often worked with young people.

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His landlord, Pat Mueller, called police for a well-being check after a team helping document his work did not hear from him.

"He just had a very kind heart," she said. "And whoever got to know him, he really touched them in many ways,"

An artist for four decades, Bahauddeen's work often paid homage to Nigerian religion and to the Black American experience, "with a spiritual range that extended from the bitter to the joyous," according to a statement from his son and daughter following his death. His artwork often incorporated West African [Adinkra symbols](#) and Yoruba spiritual ideas. He was particularly known for making large-scale ceramic tile murals, some spanning 500 square feet.

Bahauddeen described his work as spiritual and healing, something echoed by artist and friend Ras Ammar Nsoroma.

Nsoroma first met Bahauddeen in Chicago in the early '90s during a public art tour, which featured one of Bahauddeen's ceramic sculptures. The two soon became friends. Nsoroma would feature Bahauddeen's works in exhibits he curated.

He said Bahauddeen's work was deeply rooted in an African perspective and made connections between African spirituality and cultural themes and modern African-American concepts.

"It kind of aligned with who he was as a person," Nsoroma said, adding that Bahauddeen embraced Ifa, the traditional religion of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. "Some of those ideas bled into his work."

But, he noted, Bahauddeen's impact came from working with clay, a medium few Black artists use. Most artists create in two-dimensional media like painting, photography, or collage.

“Here you have an artist working with ceramics, and it is three-dimensional sometimes, low relief other times,” Nsoroma said. “He made sure the work was very textual. The work had volume and presence to it.”

In a 2023 conversation with Ho-Chunk artist Melanie Tallmadge Sainz, Bahauddeen talked about what he loved about working with clay, and particularly slabs.

"When I went to the Art Institute in '79, studying just two subjects – ceramics and lithography – I got really bored with throwing it on the wheel," he said. "And one day I walked in and this person was using this slab roller. I said, 'OK, there it is! That's what I want to do.' ... I could roll out slabs, I could draw on them, I could put texture on them. And I came to the realization that we can use almost anything to create texture for the surface of any composition."

The artist remained deeply involved in community art projects

Born in Chicago in 1949 and raised in Michigan, Bahauddeen earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1985, where he later taught and met his future wife, Dr. Phyllis Thompson, who now lives in New York. They had two children, Nazeer and Nzingha.

The family moved to Milwaukee in 1990. He went on to teach at Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, University School and the now-closed Cardinal Stritch University.

Art was a must in the Bahauddeen household. Unlike most fathers, Bahauddeen let his children draw and scribble on the wall – or more specifically, sheets of drywall placed outside their bedrooms.

“We could just free draw whatever a kid wants to draw,” recalled Nazeer Bahauddeen, who now teaches in China. “We could just do it.”

Nzingha Thompson, a teacher and actress who lives in California, recalled her childhood as “the most creatively free time of my life.”

“We were constantly creating things with clay because that was his medium, so it became ours,” she said. “When a child ... has a tool in their hand – whether it be a crayon, marker or pencil – it's a way to express yourself. It doesn't have to be on a piece of paper. It could be a piece of clay. It could be a wall. It could be wood.”

Bahauddeen was deeply involved in having everyday people involved in, and exposed to, artwork.

He partnered with Arts@Large on Milwaukee Public Schools projects for more than a dozen years, his children said. He led ceramic tile-making workshops, and mentored youths through St. Charles Youth and Family Services, the Benedict Center and Lake Valley Camp.

Bahauddeen's best known community-based art project was the Peace Post, which became a series of installations that engaged residents, community groups and youth organizations. The posts contained messages of goodwill, peace and longevity written by people in the community. They were wrapped in handmade ceramic tiles.

“He called them sort of like medicine posts,” Nazeer Bahauddeen said of his father. “They are inserted into the ground but emanating these powerful Adinkra symbols, emanating these powerful ideas or small opportunities of creative change. Creativity and artwork help people heal.”

Bahauddeen's work has been featured at Froedtert Hospital, 5 Points Center for the Visual Arts, the Saint Kate Hotel, the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, [the Museum of Wisconsin Art](#) and numerous other locations.

Through the years, Bahauddeen remained humble and approachable. He was often found at Amaranth Bakery and Café, across the street from his West Lisbon Avenue studio.

The café's co-owner, David Boucher, said he knew Bahauddeen for nearly 25 years. He called the artist "mission-driven" and "incredibly versatile," able to work at different scales and with so many different people.

"Milwaukee lost a great one," Boucher said. "The great thing is that his work lives on."

Bahauddeen is survived by his son, Nazeer Bahauddeen, daughter Nzingha Thompson, former wife Dr. Phyllis Thompson, brother James W. Blassingame, sister Myra L. Jordan, and sister-in-law Lawanda S. Blassingame. He was preceded in death by his brother, John Blassingame Jr.

The family is seeking help from art institutions to keep Muneer Bahauddeen's legacy alive with a space to house his work and share with the public. To find out how to help, email: beemuneerlegacy@gmail.com.
