



BY TOM LEVY/THE CHRONICLE

Virginia Goldstein stood in front of a large mosaic designed by her ex-husband, Sausalito waterfront artist Jean Varda

Mural Spruced Up, Now Needs a Home

By Katy Butler
Chronicle Staff Writer

After six years hidden under plastic and crates, a rare mosaic by the late Sausalito waterfront artist Jean Varda was displayed this weekend at the Sausalito Arts Festival.

Troops of visitors, breaking away from tented booths of art for sale, mounted a makeshift scaffold for a view of the newly cleaned mural, lying on its back in the sun. Its little chips of colored glass showed a scene from a joyful dream: a mosaic knight in a beaked mask, holding up a fish, courting an orange-gowned princess who balances a basketful of mountains on her head. There are arches, banners, flags flying from turrets — and, characteristically, no black anywhere.

"His style derives from Byzantine art, but the scene is all fantasy," said Virginia Barclay Goldstein, Varda's former wife, who sat under a nearby umbrella collecting contributions to install the mural permanently in Sausalito's Waterfront Park.

"He loved to paint birds, fishes and celestial cities. He hated black, and he used to say that he wanted his stuff to vie with the colors of real birds and fishes."

Goldstein, 72, an artist and textile designer whom Varda once de-

scribed as "the best rumba dancer this side of Mexico City," married the Greek-born artist next to a roaring waterfall in Big Sur in 1940.

She was divorced from him six years later. In 1947, Varda moved onto the Sausalito waterfront, into a studio on the ferryboat Vallejo, which also sheltered philosopher Alan Watts. There, he painted and made collages of a joyful, dreamy, mythical world and became a central figure among the houseboat artists. Varda's parties — grand tribalistic happenings in which guests donned masks and performed spontaneous plays — were at least as well known as his paintings.

In 1969, he ferried 600 guests to a grand 75th birthday party on a dry dock in the middle of Richardson Bay, where guests dressed in fantastical costumes parodied an Aztec ritual and "sacrificed" a virgin. Two years later, he died, suddenly, of heart failure.

His mural, which was commissioned in the late 1960s by the Villa Roma motel near Fishermans Wharf in San Francisco, was threatened with destruction in 1982, when the wedding-cake-shaped motel was razed.

Designed by Varda and executed by mosaicist Alfonso Pardinias, the mural was saved by developer Vincent di Suvero and friends, who

brought in cranes, removed the 23-ton chunk of wall and got permission from the Golden Gate Bridge District to cart it over to Sausalito, where it was given to the city.

"The entire effort cost about \$25,000, and it'll cost about \$30,000 more to install it," di Suvero said yesterday. "It's been on its back waiting for a suitable location in Sausalito for six years. Every time we agreed on a site, somebody else would complain."

Although the mosaic was stored outside, it is scarcely damaged.

"Now it looks as though it's going to be behind a children's sandbox, with a movable stage in front of it," di Suvero said. "Varda's entire attitude was that art was transitory. He used to say that 'museum' was just a shorthand way of saying 'mausoleum.' I'm sure he's amused, wherever he is, that this effort is going on to make it permanent."

OBITUARIES

Robert E. McDonald

Robert Eugene McDonald, 47, a longtime San Francisco fund-raiser, died Saturday of AIDS-related heart failure at San Francisco General Hospital.

Mr. McDonald recently directed the campaign to raise funds for the restoration and seismic strengthening of Saint Dominic's Catholic Church in San Francisco. He had previously raised money for the Langley Porter Institute at the University of California at San Francisco. And he was also a former director of development at the University of San Francisco, where he raised money for the Koret Health and Recreation Center and other capital improvement projects.

A native of Merna, Ill., Mr. Mc-

Donald was one of the founders of Sinfonia San Francisco, a chamber music orchestra, and was on the boards of several civic organizations, including the San Francisco Community Music Center. He was owner of Sticky Bun Bakery, which operated until last year with San Francisco stores on Market Street and Chenery Street.

He is survived by a daughter, Stephanie, of San Francisco, and two sisters, Charlotte, of San Francisco, and Eleanor, of St. Louis.

A Mass will be celebrated on Wednesday at 10 a.m. at St. Dominic's Church, Bush and Steiner streets. Donations are suggested to the California AIDS Education and Support Foundation, 4005 California Street, No. 1, San Francisco 94118.