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ANCIENT ART IN NEW CONTEXTS:

An “Our Town” Placemaking Project for Schenectady

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I exited off the Michigan Avenue Exit ramp of Schenectady’s I-890 highway and smiled. Looming in front of me was the mural that was created by Raè Frasier, of Art Money (<https://www.facebook.com/artmon3y>), who mentored three students enrolled in the Schenectady Job Training Agency’s after-

school jobs program, as well as community fieldwork intern, Divena Ramessar. A part of New York Folklore’s “Our Town” placemaking grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the mural serves as a visual reminder that one is entering the City of Schenectady, which boasts a Guya-

nese population, which is now one-third of the entire city’s population.

“Working with youth in the community is an impactful way to expose kids to their own gifts and abilities. Art is rarely presented to kids as a viable way to make a living.”—Raè Frasier, Art Money.



Mural painters in front of their completed mural. *From left:* Divena Ramessar, Community Fieldwork Intern; Precise Felton, Student Intern; Raè Frasier, Mural Artist; Beautiful Turner, Student Intern; and Austin Adams, Student Intern.. *All photos courtesy of New York Folklore unless otherwise noted.*



The Caribbean-influenced mural has become a focal point for Schenectady's Guyanese community.

The Caribbean-themed mural was one of several culminating activities, which were developed and implemented through a NEA “Our Town” placemaking grant for 2023–2024. Conceived by Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra, as a partnership with New York Folklore (NYF), the intent of the project was to recognize the connections of North Indian classical traditions with the Guyanese community in Schenectady. The activities—funded through the “Our Town” grant, with matching support from Schenectady County, the Schenectady City School District, and the Golub Price Chopper Foundation—included performances and workshops about North Indian classical music in each of Schenectady’s elementary, middle, and high schools; visits by Guyanese artists, including Divena Ramessar who led art classes, and Lalita Ramnauth who led music classes in Schenectady’s Community Schools; a public mural to draw attention to Schenectady’s Caribbean heritages; performances of Indian classical music at the outdoor Schenectady Greenmarket;

and a collaboration with the Music Haven Stage and the Schenectady Film Board for performances of North Indian music and Guyanese music and dance before an outdoor showing of the Bollywood film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. Taken as a whole, the year-long immersive program was instrumental to New York Folklore’s impact in Schenectady.

In 2022, NYF was approached by Veena Chandra to solicit our interest in this community-wide collaboration. Veena Chandra and her son, Devesh Chandra, are renowned Indian classical musicians who perform widely throughout the United States and who are active as teaching artists and educators, both through teaching their respective instruments at their Latham, New York-based dance and music school, and through their positions as artists-in-residence at Skidmore College (Veena Chandra) and Williams College (Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra).

Born in Dehra Doon (Dehradun), located in the valley of the Himalayas on November

30, 1944, Veena was inspired to play music by her father, her first guru. She continued learning sitar with a disciple of Ravi Shankar, Shri Satish Chandra, who was later to become her husband and the father of her six children. Veena continued her advanced training under the late Ustad Vilayat Khan Saheb, while also earning Master’s degrees in music, ranking third in all of India for a Master’s in Music. Veena Chandra holds a Master’s degree in sociology and a Bachelor’s degree in teaching. She has been performing and teaching sitar for more than 60 years and is well known throughout New York’s Capital District through her ongoing free performances in libraries and other community settings.

Veena’s son, Devesh, the youngest of her six children, was immersed in an environment of music, as he grew up. He has been learning the tabla since the age of three years. Through the tutelage of his mother, Devesh learned Indian classical music by accompanying his mother, renowned on sitar, and was also influenced through working



The mural in process.

with the late Ustad Vilayat Khan Saheb. Devesh Chandra continues to perform with his mother and serves as her primary accompanist. The mother and son duo has received national and international acclaim. Devesh is a sought after performer and educator in his own right. In addition to traditional Indian classical music performances, he has collaborated and worked with musicians across a broad range of musical genres from Western folk and Western classical to flamenco, jazz, Latin music, Japanese Taiko, and different African music traditions.

As initiated by Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra, the school-based programs followed similar formats: following a large group assembly program and concert of North Indian classical music on sitar and tabla, students at each Schenectady school were provided opportunities to interact more intimately with the performers. Depending upon the school and the ages of the children, this face-to-face interaction was designed by the school's faculty to be implemented within classroom or other small-group settings. In many cases, it was the art and music teachers, or band and orchestra teachers, who provided opportunities for additional exposure, whether through a mini-presentation on the structure of Indian classical music, participatory music-making with

orchestra students, or guided drawing to the accompaniment of sitar and tabla. As one elementary school art teacher exclaimed, "They were wonderful and the kids were excited. I had one student singing along with Veena and Devesh because he knew

the raga from church. It was exciting to see the kids understand they were represented."

The students' exposure in their classroom to North Indian classical and Guyanese traditions is an important validation of Indo-Caribbean heritage for students, as 48 percent of the Schenectady School district population is of Guyanese descent. Guyana, a Caribbean nation on the South American continent experienced a 19th-century forced migration of Indian laborers, largely from Northern India. In the aftermath of the emancipation of enslaved Africans (1834–1838) in the British West Indies, plantation owners successfully pressured the colonial government to begin a system of indentured servitude. The distant sister colony of India proved to be an ideal source of agricultural labor. Often deceived by British plantation owners to enter into bondage, large numbers of indentured Indian laborers were bound to sugar plantations under British colonial rule. Between 1845 and 1917, approximately 239,000 Indians (primarily from the North Indian region of Bhojpur) were resettled in



Devesh Chandra and Veena Chandra in concert at Oneida Middle School, Schenectady. Photo courtesy of Oneida Middle School.



Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra with the Schenectady High School Jazz Ensemble.

British Guiana. Although about one-fifth of these workers returned to India, the rest chose to remain, founding communities that survive into the present. Their descendants now comprise roughly 52 percent of the population of Guyana (Manuel 2000, 1–14).

The Guyanese community of Schenectady had its origins in about 2000, when then mayor of Schenectady, Albert Jurczynski, began to recruit potential homeowners from the Guyanese communities living in Queens, New York. Since 1965, the Richmond Hill neighborhood of Queens, New York, has become home to approximately 40,000 diasporic Indians of Guyanese ancestry (Bacchus 2020). Through a form of tertiary internal migration, families began to relocate to Schenectady in the late 1990s, encouraged by realtors and city officials who touted the prevalence of affordable housing,

which was a result of Schenectady's shrinking industrial base. By 2020, the Guyanese population numbered at 10 percent of Schenectady's population, with that percentage growing with both births and new migrants arriving directly from Guyana. Now, more than two decades later, the Guyanese population is a significant presence in Schenectady. Largely devotees of Hinduism, there are several Mandirs (Hindu Temples) in the city, as well as a Guyanese Community Center, and several businesses and restaurants. In addition to the Guyanese population, many Schenectady residents cite Suriname, Trinidad, and other Caribbean nations as their ancestral origins.

Cultural traditions reflect the bonded labor and forced resettlement of laborers from India to the Caribbean to work on the sugar plantations, and the introduction

of Indian culture into the South American environment. In that setting, a creole culture developed that drew upon Indian, native Arawak, English, and African influences. It is the creolized nature of Guyanese culture that provided opportunities to discuss both connections and divergences from Indian classical traditions within the context of a "placemaking" program for Schenectady.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, in Guyana, Indian religious traditions were retained, including both Hindu and Muslim faith traditions. The Hindu celebrations of Diwali (the Festival of Lights) and Holi (known as Phagwah in the Guyanese community) are celebrated in Guyana (Ramsaran and Lewis 2018). In addition, through the process of creolization and syncretism within Guyana, new forms of folk culture were created in a transnational context,



Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra, answering student questions at the Dr. Martin Luther King Elementary School, Schenectady.

including foodways and music and dance traditions.

In the Caribbean, chutney music is primarily played during family gatherings and after Hindu religious celebrations. This tradition has continued, more widely in Richmond Hill but also subsequently in

Schenectady. Chutney music was developed in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1970s and 1980s, as a modernization of fast, fairly simple Hindi songs in the style of folk music. This musical form was quickly adopted by Indo-Caribbean communities in Guyana. Chutney accompanies social dancing, which

combines hand movements and vigorous pelvic rotation largely derived from Bhojpuri folk dance (Manuel 2020, 8–13). Often accompanied by the harmonium, the *dhholak* (a barrel drum) and the *dantal* (a metal percussion instrument), chutney music is considered to be the music of celebration, as it includes upbeat song lyrics and lively dancing. As stated by Manuel (2000, 2), “Chutney serves as the most visible symbol of the formulation of new notions of national [Guyanese] culture.”

While the inception of the “Our Town” initiative was to highlight North Indian classical music, New York Folklore’s staff felt that it was vitally important to include Guyanese folk arts and culture as a key part of the project. With supplemental support from the Schenectady School District, NYF provided additional programming through adding the participation of artists from Schenectady’s Guyanese community. Based upon ongoing fieldwork by Anne Rappaport-Berliner, artists were identified who represented traditional arts and culture tied to the Caribbean nation of Guyana. Artistic traditions presented in the classroom included folk songs by noted chutney singer Lalita Ramnauth, which highlighted Guyana’s natural world, the making of masks, and other carnivalesque aspects of Guyana’s Independence celebration (Mashramani), and foodways traditions.

Although a public art component had been included in the original project concept, it quickly became apparent that the outdoor mural should reflect a Caribbean heritage, rather than an Indian heritage as was originally proposed. The resulting mural was conceptualized as part artistic endeavor, part training for the youth of the Schenectady Connects Program. Three high school-aged youth employees saw the mural through multiple phases of creation—from finding the mural a home, filling out City Hall’s paperwork, getting community input, and finally, painting. After much discussion with key community partners, it was agreed the mural should celebrate not just Schenectady’s Guyanese Community, but the Caribbean heritage of Schenectady. However,



Devesh Chandra explaining the tabla to a small group of Schenectady elementary school students.



Teaching artist Divena Ramessar, demonstrating the decorating of a Mashramani mask.

the mural does pay homage to the Guyanese community, by featuring water lilies, the national flower of Guyana. Key community members who brought the project to life include Schenectady County Legislator Philip Fields, property owners Debbie and Shawn Budhraj who provided the “canvas” for the mural in the form of a brick wall of their property, Caribbean Day Festival organizer and chutney singer Lalita Ramnauth, and leaders of the Guyanese Cultural Center, George Ramson and Deryck Singh. The mural serves as a reminder of Schenectady’s Caribbean heritages and has proven to be a point of pride for Schenectady residents.

Successes

Although NYF has been located in Schenectady (part of New York’s Capital District) since 1999, the organization had previously made few connections with the city’s Guyanese population. Around 2012, through the efforts of folklorist Lisa

Overholser, NYF conducted some limited folklife documentation and presented two programs of harmonium and Guyanese dance by Schenectady-based teens. These activities, however, had been the extent of our engagement with the community. For NYF, an important outcome of this citywide and two-year initiative has been the connections that we have been able to forge with community organizations and artists in Schenectady.

As an organization, we are grateful to Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra for their ongoing

advocacy and yearlong support for the program and its schedule. According to Veena Chandra, the response from the community has been deeply fulfilling. She states:

Students in Schenectady schools come from diverse cultural backgrounds and underserved communities. We have been pleased with how eagerly the students have engaged with us and embraced the music and culture.

Ultimately, our vision is to create a lasting impact that goes beyond the classroom, empowering students to become global citizens who value and respect the richness of the cultural tapestry in their community (quoted in Coons [2024]).

The ripples of this project will continue into the future. Apprenticeship opportunities for youth to learn tabla and sitar are possible, as is instruction on the harmonium. The Schenectady School District has independently approached Veena

Chandra and Devesh Chandra to continue their engagement with the school district. Lalita Ramnauth, a chutney singer, has received apprenticeship support from the New York State Council on the Arts to take an apprentice. Mural artist, Raè Frasier has been approached by at least two Caribbean restaurants to paint additional murals.

In keeping with New York Folklore’s mission to work collaboratively with communities, we are pleased to be working with community scholar, teaching artist, and advocate, Divena Ramessar, who serves as a part-time staff person for NYF. Divena’s work will help to continue our involvement in this important Upstate community. ▼

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