

San Francisco Examiner

IMAGE

APRIL 19, 1992

Out of Her League

Umpire Pam Postema's battle with baseball's good ol' boys

Uncivil Society:
The mean spirit sweeping America

Lost Treasures:
Searching for S.F.'s forgotten world's fair



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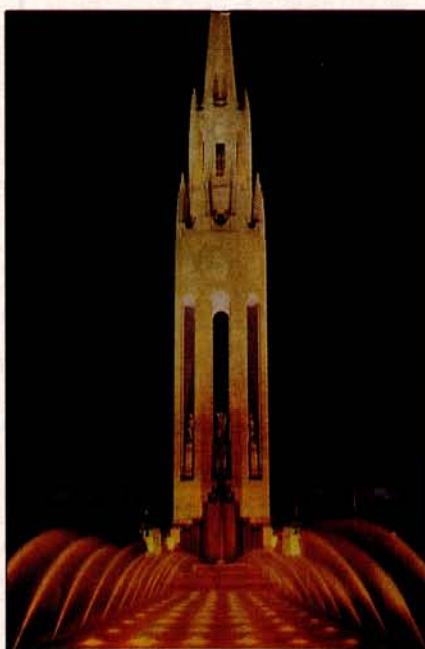
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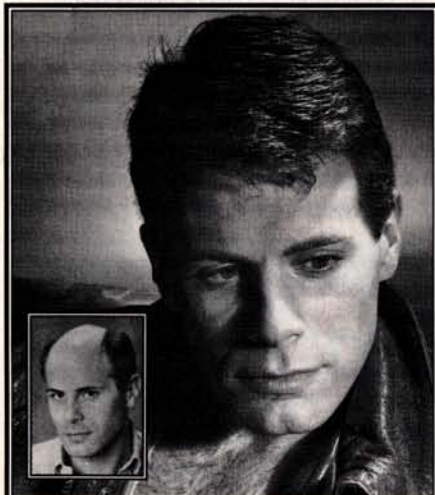
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TOWER OF THE SUN, TREASURE ISLAND, 1939/COURTESY OF THE TREASURE ISLAND MUSEUM



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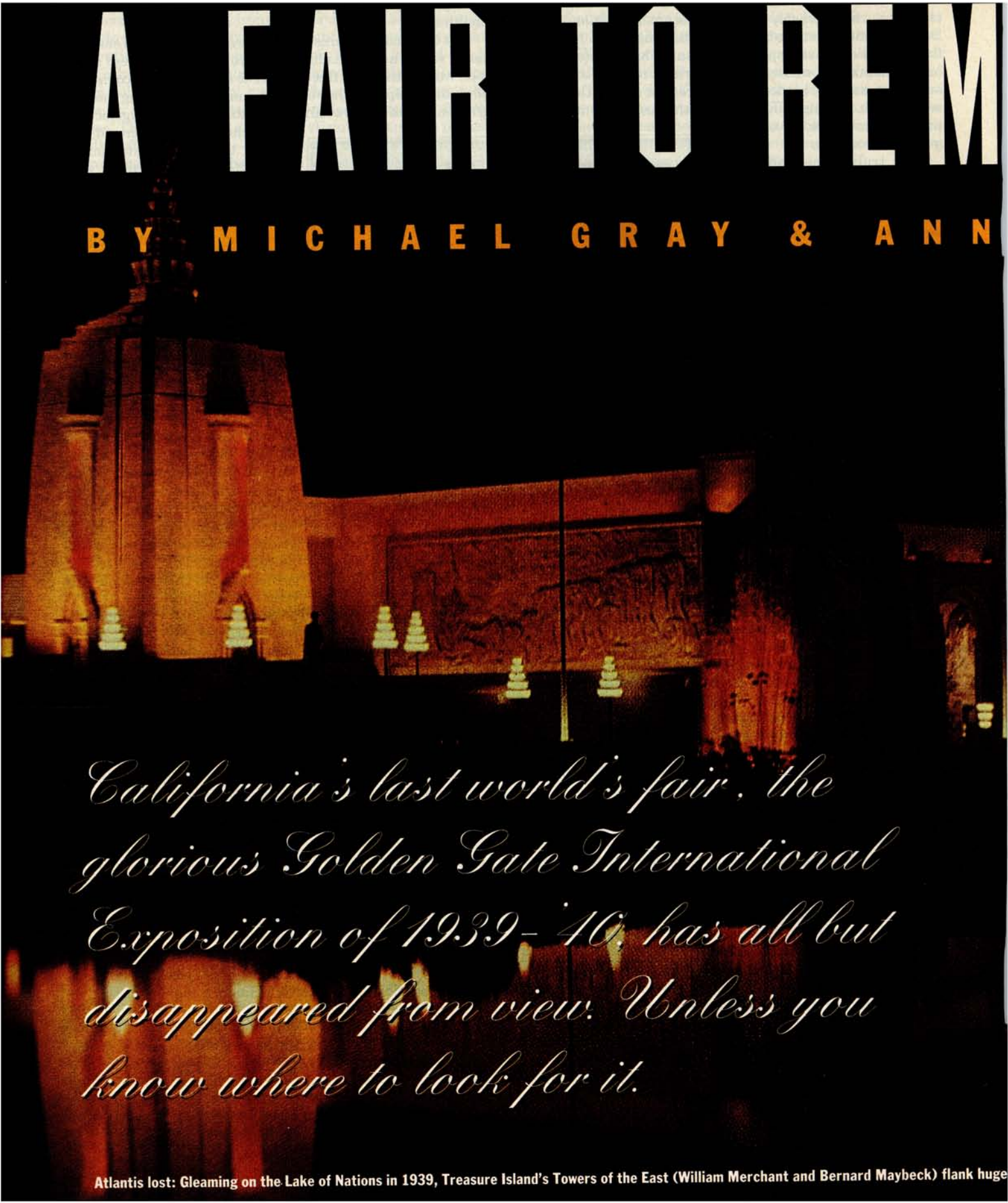
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THE BOLD LOOK
OF KOHLER

A FAIR TO REM

BY MICHAEL GRAY & ANN



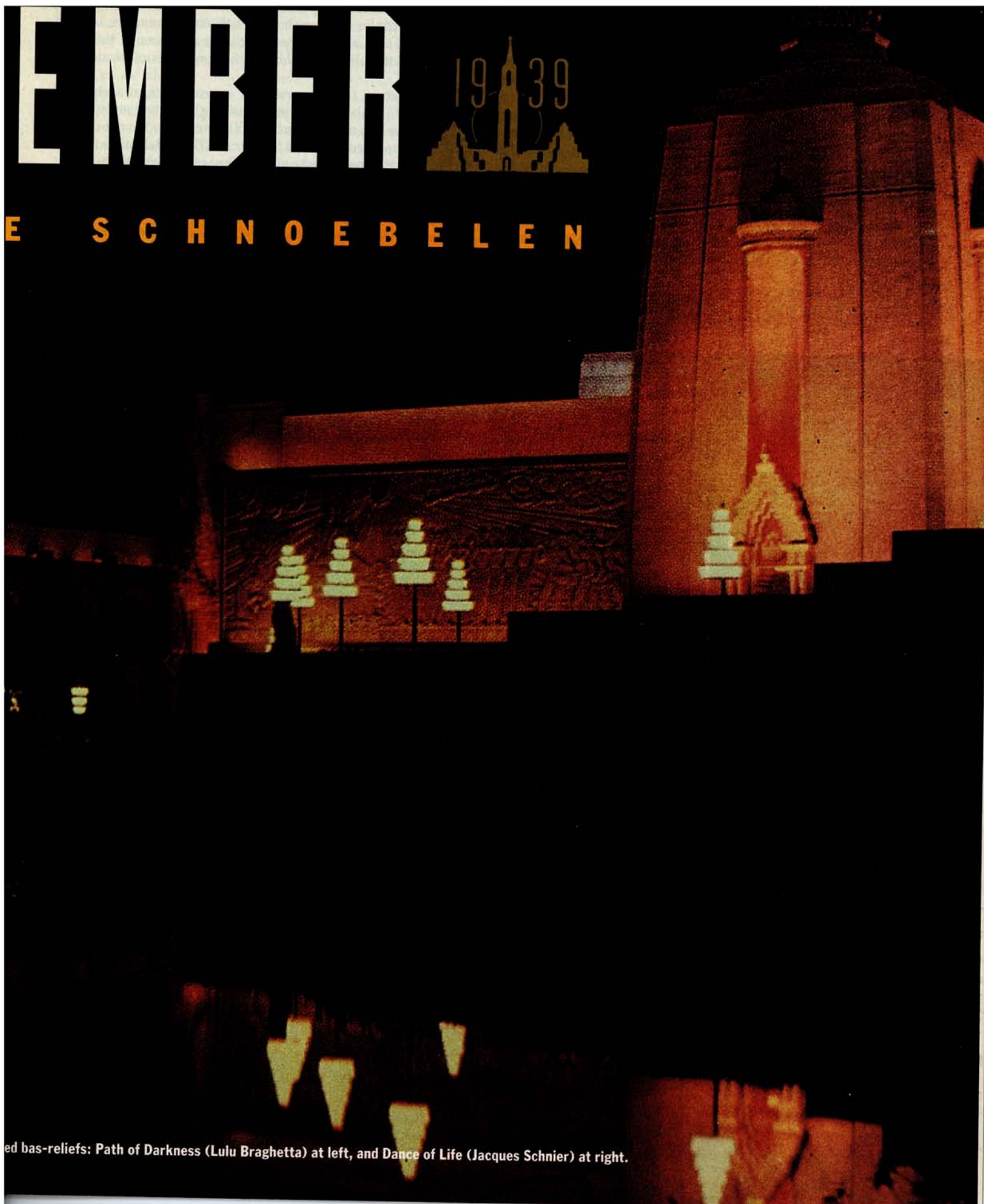
California's last world's fair, the glorious Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939-40, has all but disappeared from view. Unless you know where to look for it.

Atlantis lost: Gleaming on the Lake of Nations in 1939, Treasure Island's Towers of the East (William Merchant and Bernard Maybeck) flank huge

EMBER



E S C H N O E B E L E N



ed bas-reliefs: Path of Darkness (Lulu Braghetta) at left, and Dance of Life (Jacques Schnier) at right.

Tomorrow, a world's fair, supposedly the last "great" world's fair of the 20th century, opens in Seville, Spain, a celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyages to the New World.

It's not likely a date marked on many calendars. World's fairs are just not the epochal events they once were. Not like the incredible Paris Exposition of 1889, or San Francisco's romantic, up-from-the-ashes Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915. These fairs resonate still, both in legend and in surviving structures — the Eiffel Tower and the Palace of Fine Arts — that carry their memories forward. The Seville site, by contrast, will be succeeded by a high-tech industrial park.

But even a great world's fair can be forgotten, if fate and bad luck so conspire. Take California's last world's fair, for example, perhaps the last truly "great" world's fair. Which one was that? you ask. When and where? Good questions. Until a few years ago, neither of us knew the answers, either. We started poking around, and in the

time since have become, much to our astonishment, "leading authorities" on this all but vanished fair. Two amateur history buffs, we were looking for what we thought were simple answers. Instead we stumbled onto a lost and seemingly cursed treasure: the 1939-'40 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island.

We've come to call ourselves "amateur urban archaeologists," a joke on the irony of having to dig so deeply to find traces of a major event just 50 years past. It's not that no one has written about the fair. GGIE guidebooks and other texts are bibles to any student of the fair. More recent books by Richard Reinhardt and Pat Carpenter help to fill gaps. But these deal mainly in nostalgia, memories of people who were at the fair. We are looking for documentation of things we never saw and which no longer exist — the GGIE's art and architecture — and most books raise as many questions as they answer.

AFTER A TWO-YEAR RUN THAT DREW 17 MILLION VISITORS, THE ART DEC



More importantly, no book has yet addressed the most alluring fact about the GGIE: that it was a kind of Florence in the American art renaissance of the 1930s. But almost all the art of Treasure Island — sculptures and murals by artists now exhibited in museums and galleries — has disappeared. What remains is behind security gates on Treasure Island or scattered elsewhere. Treasure Island itself is an almost forgotten location, and its past glories are forgotten, too.

Why? Simple, really. After a two-year run that drew 17 million visitors to a man-made Art Deco oasis in the middle of the Bay, the GGIE disappeared almost overnight. America went to war, and Treasure Island went too. The Navy took over the island, and “the destination of the West” was suddenly off-limits. Most of the GGIE’s amazing art and architecture wasn’t meant to last, but the war made the transition time brutally brief and hectic. Salvagers sold off everything they could in short order. In the diaspora, fair buildings, sculptures, murals and exhibits were scattered.

Whatever was left was either converted to Navy use or demolished. A smattering of futile attempts was made to save icons like “Pacifica,” the 80-foot goddess who had watched over the fair. By mid-1942, the “Magic City” on the Bay, like a modern-day Atlantis, had abruptly and irretrievably disappeared.

Or so it seemed. We have learned in our search for what survives of GGIE art and architecture that while much has been lost or forgotten, there is more of it still around than we had imagined. Artifacts can be found all over San Francisco and the Bay Area, in hidden corners of the Delta and Central Valley, in parks and county fairgrounds across the state — and on Treasure Island itself.

We first came to Treasure Island at different times, and for different reasons. Anne, at the time writing a dissertation and teaching freshman composition, came for a historical society walking tour. Mike, a journalist, came looking for material to write about the 50th anniversary of the fair’s opening in 1989. What each of us

0 OASIS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BAY DISAPPEARED ALMOST OVERNIGHT.

THIS AND PREVIOUS PAGE PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE TREASURE ISLAND MUSEUM

Donald Macky, right, smiles below the Treasure Island Museum’s mock-up of one of his cubist elephants. As a 26-year-old sculptor/architect in 1939, Macky designed the wonderful Elephant Towers, or Portals of the Pacific, along the fair’s western wall, left (the Tower of the Sun looms behind). Still active as an architect, he seemed surprised at our interest in “that old stuff.” He had thrown out his drawings and models long ago. But he recalled that the temples of Angkor Wat had been his inspiration, and told us, to our surprise, that he still had a building on Treasure Island. For the Navy, he built the chapel that stands almost exactly where his elephants had been. Below, a postcard view of the exposition.

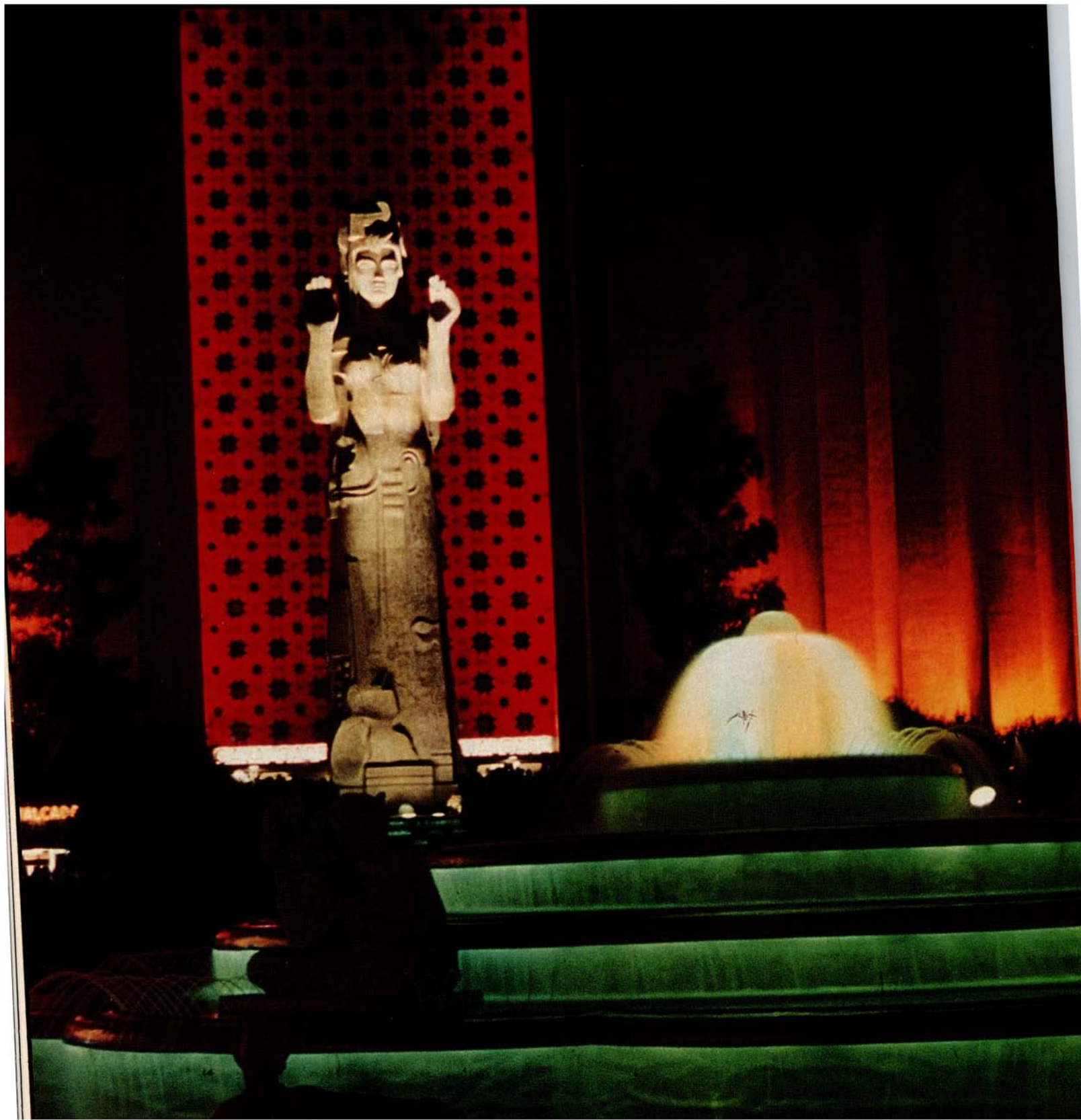
PENNI GLADSTONE



COURTESY OF GGIE RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

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GOLDEN GATE INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION ON SAN FRANCISCO BAY



found were scattered and tarnished relics of something very beautiful and fragile, tantalizing hints of a world that had almost completely passed away. So tantalizing that we have devoted tremendous amounts of time to fleshing them out.

Coming upon the neglected remains of the fair's Court of Pacifica on Treasure Island was like stumbling upon remnants of an ancient civilization. Sixteen oversized cast-stone (concrete) sculptures representing various peoples of the Pacific region appeared to have just emerged from the dirt and mud. Their stoic features had been ravaged by weather and vandals. The fragile and beautiful Pacific Basin Fountain, a colorful terra cotta relief map of the Pacific as large as a backyard swimming pool, had become a forlorn shell, a constant target for bottles and rocks.

We had seen photographs and films of the fair's exotic "Pacific Basin" architecture and beautiful gardens, now all memories. But the damaged, decayed remains of the ghostly Court of Pacifica were still living, breathing creations — the soul of the fair, we would learn, somehow surviving. Why, when almost everything else was destroyed or carted away, did these still stand? Why had these particular objects, so expressive of the fair's poignant theme of Pacific unity on the eve of Pacific war, remained? These questions set us off in search of Treasure Island's legacy, a search that is still turning up as many questions as answers.

A few things are clear. The GGIE, also known as the Pageant of the Pacific, was the first

WHY DID THESE OBJECTS, THE VERY SOUL OF THE FAIR, SURVIVE?

American world's fair to look beyond Europe for its inspiration. Instead, it took as its theme a celebration of the Pacific region, of the indigenous peoples of the West and Far East.

It was also almost entirely a home-grown production. A design team including most of San Francisco's leading artists and architects created the "Pacific Basin" style that characterized the fair: fantastical art and architecture that aimed to reflect styles from across the Pacific — the American West, the Pacific Islands, Asia and South and Central America. How successful this was is still debated by architectural historians and critics. But as exposition architecture — essentially a huge and elaborate stage set — it was remarkable. It left indelible impressions on those who saw it, and still makes fans of Art Deco drool with delight.

The list of notable names connected with GGIE art and architecture is a long one. Architect Bernard Maybeck, designer of the 1915 Palace of Fine Arts, helped design the fair. So did Timothy Pflueger, William Merchant, Arthur Brown Jr., George Kelham, Ernest Born and Lewis Hobart. Among the artists of the GGIE were Robert Howard, Ralph Stackpole, Herman Volz, Anna Hyatt Huntington and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Revered Western artist Maynard Dixon created his largest — and among his last — murals for the fair: "Plowed Land" and "Grass Land," near the Court of Pacifica. But scarcely any photographs of Dixon's murals can be found.

Despite these credentials, however, the fair's art and architecture have received little acclaim since they "disappeared" a half-century ago. It's not surprising, really. What remains on Treasure Island — including Kelham's Streamline Modern administration building, now the Navy's major office building and home to the Treasure Island Museum — is off-limits to visitors except during museum hours. And remnants of the GGIE that ended up elsewhere are rarely recognized as deriving from the GGIE — even by those who own them.

Every day, for instance, business people walk by five large mural maps of the Pacific in the World Trade Center in the Ferry Building. These were executed by renowned Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias for the fair's theme building, Pacific House. Children frolicking in the courtyard of the Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park don't know that the black whales intertwined in the fountain were sculpted by Robert Howard as the centerpiece for the San Francisco Building at the fair. Students roaming the City College campus on Phelan Avenue are probably unaware that they are surrounded by artifacts from the fair's "Art in Action" exhibit — Herman Volz's huge mosaics, Dudley Carter's redwood ram, Frederick Law Olmsted's busts of Edison and da Vinci, Diego Rivera's "Pan American Unity" fresco (in the theater lobby). And how many visitors to San Francisco International Airport know that the huge "Peace" sculpture they see near the entrance was Benny Bufano's major commission for the fair — one never exhibited after the temperamental artist had a falling out with GGIE officials?

But what about the pieces still unaccounted for, the "grails" of our GGIE quest? What, for instance, was the fate of Edgar Dorsey Taylor's elaborate, 40-by-15-foot stained-glass map of Pacific trade routes? It seems inconceivable that a wrecking ball could have claimed it. The answer might be in the papers of the Exposition Company, except that they were scattered across the country years ago when a fair official cleaned out his basement and had them

PENNI GLADSTONE



Grace Sotomayor, above, spent lots of time at the GGIE, most of it in the exposition's theme building, Pacific House, where she lectured and helped receive dignitaries. Her husband, Antonio Sotomayor, who died in 1985, was a native of Bolivia who moved to San Francisco in the early '20s. "Soto's" hand-sculpted terra cotta Pacific Basin Fountain, the centerpiece of Pacific House and still on Treasure Island awaiting restoration (shown below before its recent dismantling and storage), was one of his proudest accomplishments. A famed caricaturist, Sotomayor deco-

KATY RADDATZ



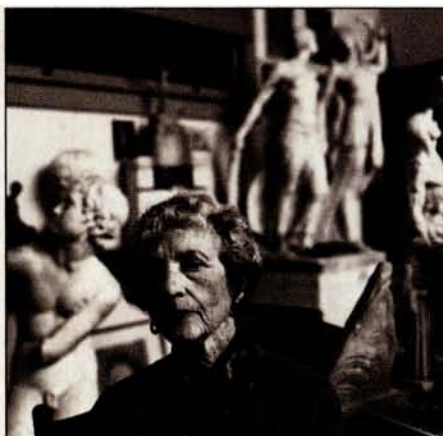
rated their Nob Hill home with witty touches like the faux mantelpiece behind Grace, above. Opposite, some of the Pacific Unity sculptures as they appeared at the GGIE, around a fountain in Timothy Pflueger's dramatically lit Court of Pacifica, named for the 80-foot goddess designed by sculptor Ralph Stackpole.

hauled away. Or it might be in the files of The City's Museum of Modern Art, in papers of Pacific House director and MOMA founder Grace McCann Morley. But the papers are uncataloged, and MOMA is without staff to assist researchers.

And so the search continues: an obsession, a source of great exhilaration and great frustration. It has led us to travel across the state, cost us thousands of dollars and made us notorious among local librarians, collectors and historians. It has strained relations at work, with loved ones and, occasionally, between us. But it has also brought us many magical and unforgettable experiences.

Sometimes it seems our search is cursed. A day after we obtained a phone number for GGIE artist Millard Sheets, for example, his obituary appeared in the newspaper. We tracked down heirs of some of the fair's salvagers, but they seem strangely reticent, as if they are hiding something.

But we have also had the thrill of discovering the human side of a history not yet written: our first contact with Helen Phillips, the last living "Pacific Unity" sculptor; phone calls that have come out of nowhere, connecting us with a surviving artist or work of art. We have had long and spell-binding conversations with artists such as Lulu Braghetta, Marian Brackenridge and Herman Volz, and architects like Michael Goodman, Donald Macky and Ernest Born.



PENNI GLADSTONE

Entering the home of Marian Brackenridge, above, in rural Northern California is like stepping back in time. It is a shrine to the life and work of Ettore Cadorin, a Venetian sculptor who created "Evening Star," probably the most popular sculpture at the GGIE. Marian became his apprentice in the 1920s in Southern California, then traveled north with him to find work at the fair, aiding with "Evening Star." Cadorin died in the early '50s. Brackenridge, a renowned sculptor in her own right, is still active at 89. The first time she led us into her studio, we gasped. There were the final working models of "Evening Star" and another fair sculpture, "The Moon and the Dawn." The latter can be seen behind her at left; below, the sculpture itself at the exposition.

To many of them, the fair years now seem like the best years of their lives.

We have felt, at various times, like voices crying in the wilderness and like the proud discoverers of a secret treasure. Will the fair's chief legacy continue to be its anonymity? Or will San Francisco finally pay a proper tribute to the GGIE? There are signs of progress. Treasure Island has been named a state landmark, and on the island, a slow-moving project to restore and display the surviving Pacific Unity sculptures and Pacific Basin Fountain is moving ahead, but needs further financial support.

Meanwhile, we will continue our search, holding onto the hope that when the last great world's fair finally gets its due, the curse of Treasure Island will lift, and reward us with the discovery of the lost treasures we seek. ■

The Treasure Island Museum on Treasure Island (telephone 415-395-5067) is open 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. daily, except on federal holidays. Donations to the Art Treasures Restoration Project, which aims to restore and re-erect the Pacific Unity sculptures and Pacific Basin Fountain, can be made by calling (415) 243-8950.

Michael Gray is an Image senior editor. Anne Schnoebelen is a freelance writer. Together they are GGIE Research Associates, and can be contacted at (415) 454-6909 or (415) 626-2410.

WILL THE FAIR'S CHIEF LEGACY CONTINUE TO BE ITS ANONYMITY?



COURTESY OF THE TREASURE ISLAND MUSEUM