

The first-ever River Arts Festival seeks to evoke the memory of the Victorian-era Santa Cruz spectacle known as the Venetian Water Carnival



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The Venetian Water Carnival took place in 1895 and '96 in an artificial lake formed by damming the mouth of the San Lorenzo River. The event went on for several days and featured not only floats and watercraft on the lake, but parades in the streets of downtown as well. This weekend's River Arts Festival is only the latest attempt to pay tribute to the old Venetian Carnival.

Event: Festivals, holidays

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RIVER & DREAMS

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SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

No one who witnessed it or participated in it is around today to tell the rest of us about it. In fact, the vast majority of Santa Cruz County residents go about their daily lives utterly unaware it happened at all.

Which is a pity, because the Venetian Water Carnival, by many historical accounts, was the grandest, most glorious civic celebration in these parts in the entire 19th century.

And, even though it has largely receded into the mists of local history, the Venetian Carnival has, for more than 100 years, exerted a strong influence over those who would attempt to revive it.

The latest attempt to echo the Venetian is the River Arts Festival, the new two-day event that will dominate San Lorenzo Park in downtown Santa Cruz on Saturday and Sunday featuring the work of 75 juried visual artists from the community, many of whom will be demonstrating

their crafts. The event will also include live music, art installation, and a Kinetic Sculpture Race along the San Lorenzo.

Yet, even the coordinators of the River Arts Festival are not calling it a re-creation of the Venetian. None of us may ever live to see that.

The Venetian Water Carnival took place in June 1895, and again the following summer. The idea is credited to Lucy Underhill McCann, the wife of a local judge, who wanted to bring a taste of Venice to the

If You Go

WHAT: River Arts Festival
WHEN: Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
WHERE: San Lorenzo Park, downtown Santa Cruz.
COST: Free admission.
DETAILS: www.riverartsfestival.com.

California coast. It was a grandiose idea and would not have come to fruition if not for the

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Contributed photo

Glass artist Brayton Furlong will demonstrate glass blowing as part of the River Arts Festival.

Festival

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largesse of New York financier J.P. Smith.

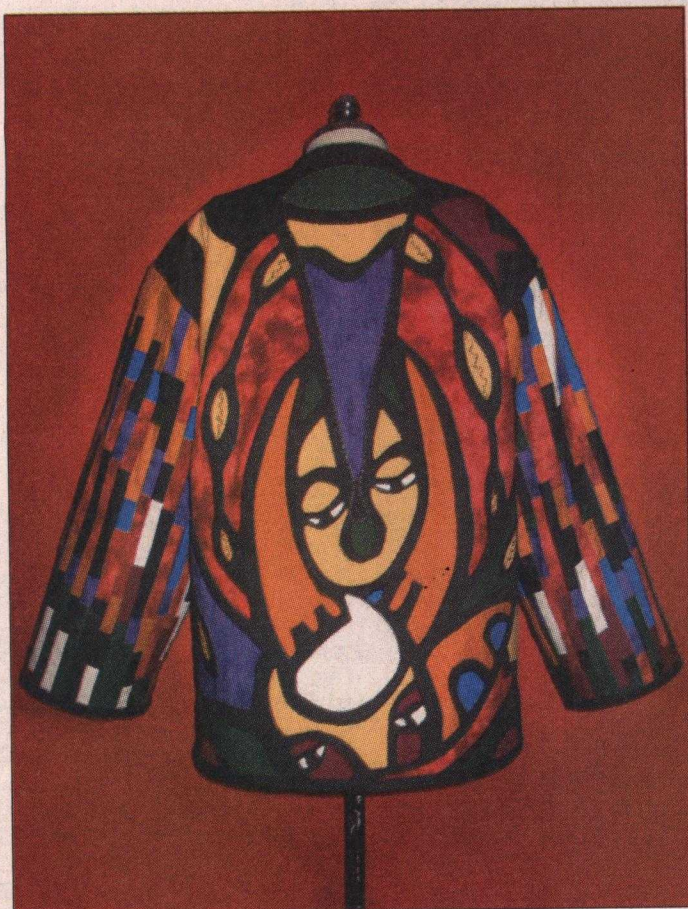
It's hard to even fathom such a thing happening today, but the plan required the damming of the mouth of the San Lorenzo River to create a large artificial lake near where the Beach Flats neighborhood today stands. Around that lake was to be built a vast ring of riverfront grandstands for spectators to the pageant of dozens of ornately decorated gondolas, water craft and floats that would pass by for three days and nights. A fleet of vessels from San Francisco entered the bay near the dammed-up river mouth and provided the thousands watching from the shore a show of fireworks, including a 21-gun salute.

Coinciding with the activities at the water's edge were parades through the streets of Santa Cruz, all culminating in the crowning of a carnival queen who sat on an elaborate throne along the river. Said a Sentinel reporter of the second carnival in 1896 in reference to the newly named queen Josie Turcot: "Never did a fairer day usher in the reign of any queen. Even the climate assisted in making the day when our Josephine ascended the throne one that augured well for the success of her reign."

Of course, this weekend's River Arts Festival has no plans to dam up the river and no reporter is likely to write about the event in such plummy Victorian-era peacockery. But it is only the latest effort to, if not revive, at least evoke the old Venetian Carnival — there has been sporadic talk of reviving the Carnival for more than 30 years.

Lynn Guenther, the event's coordinator, said that the River Arts Festival is not a recreation of the Venetian. "We're interested in paying tribute to it," she said. "We're hoping to embrace the tradition of (the Venetian)."

The new festival, said Guenther, is also an effort to follow up on other arts events of more recent vintage. From the Spring Fair — an annual event that took place until the late 1980s — to the Celebrate Santa Cruz art and wine festival — which filled the streets of downtown Santa Cruz until 2003 — to SPLAT — the alternative open-studios event that will not be taking place this year — the ambitious River Arts event is looking to follow in the wake of previous spring-time celebra-



Contributed photo

The African-inspired textile work of Nigerian-born artist I.B. Bayo will be among the dozens of art works on display at the River Arts Festival.

Sculpture in motion

One of the things that the first-ever River Arts Festival is out to prove is that art doesn't always stay still. The Festival will be the scene of an art-in-motion event called the Kinetic Sculpture Race, which will take place Sunday on the San Lorenzo River levee walk.

A dozen or more artists will participate with their rolling contraptions — a kinetic sculpture can be just about any artistic creation put on wheels — in a race starting at the Riverside Avenue bridge to the Water Street bridge from 11 a.m. to noon with the winner to be given, said race coordinator Kirby Scudder, the title "Best Artist Ever."

There will be two categories of the race: one for pedal-powered sculptures, and the other for sculptures that are pushed or pulled. The race will take place for three-quarters of a mile on the levee along the Front Street side of the river. Riders will disembark at the Water Street finish line and continue on to San Lorenzo Park where they will be put their sculptures on display.

tions of art.

River Arts will, in fact, have two central points of focus, cultural and environmental. Regarding the latter, the festival will work with the City of Santa Cruz's San Lorenzo River Committee to create displays about the ecology of the river and the plant and animal life it sustains. In the realm of the arts, the festival will feature a wide variety of local fine artists displaying their wares and 15 of them demonstrating their art in glass blowing, ceramics, mask making, textiles and other activities.

Musical performances range from jazz to rock to Brazilian to

classical with groups ranging from the Chop Suey Orchestra to the Santa Cruz Baroque Festival.

In addition, a few artists are using the Festival as a forum to install large works, including metal artist Kirk McNeill's collection of shark sculptures "Schooling Hammerheads," and Kathleen Crocetti's "Flags Over the River," in which Crocetti and her class at Mission Hill Middle School in Santa Cruz will mount more than 100 flags on the walking bridge over the river.

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