



NELLIE MAE ROWE PERMANENT EXHIBIT

Vinings Village Homeowners Association successfully secured funding to create a permanent exhibit honoring the legacy of celebrated Black folk artist Nellie Mae Rowe. Located near Hotel Indigo Vinings by the historical marker, the former site of Rowe's home, the exhibit and pocket park serve as a tribute to her life and artistic vision.

Nellie Mae Rowe was born in Fayette County, Georgia in 1900. Nellie's father, formerly enslaved, was a blacksmith and farmer, and her mother was a skilled seamstress. Nellie spent many years helping cultivate cotton and other crops on a farm the family rented. As a child, Nellie enjoyed drawing, making dolls, and learning to sew. "I wanted to be an artist, but I had to go to field," Nellie recalled in 1976. "I didn't have a chance to be what I wanted."

At the age of 16, Nellie left the farm and married Ben Wheat. The couple moved to Vinings in Cobb County in 1930, and Nellie began domestic work. After Ben's death, Nellie married Henry "Buddy" Rowe in 1936. Three years later, the couple built a clapboard house in Vinings along Paces Ferry Road. The house would eventually be transformed into what Nellie called her "playhouse."

After Henry died, Nellie devoted herself to the creation of art. Nellie used a variety of materials to create paintings, drawings, sculptures, dolls, and outdoor decorations. "When other people have things that they don't want they throw them away, but not me; I'm going to make something," she said. "I've been that way ever since I was a child. I would take nothing and make something of it."

Over the next few decades, thousands of people traveled to Vinings to see Nellie's playhouse. "Everyone from architects to the local deliveryman would stop and stare," recalled one visitor.

"It was an astounding creation." In 1976 Nellie's work was featured in an exhibit at the Atlanta History Center titled *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art 1770–1976*. It was there that art collector Judith Alexander first became aware of Nellie Mae Rowe's work. Judith and Nellie soon became friends, and Judith began promoting Nellie's artwork nationwide. Nellie's work was soon exhibited everywhere from Atlanta and New Orleans to Washington, D.C. and New York City. Nellie continued to create art until her death in 1982.

The creation of a pocket park marks a significant step toward preserving and celebrating Rowe's contributions to American art. "We wanted to honor Nellie Mae Rowe's incredible legacy by creating a permanent outdoor exhibit at the site of her former home," said Melissa Johnson, President of the Vinings Village Homeowners Association. "Nellie Mae transformed her home into a vibrant, living work of art, filled with colorful drawings, chewing gum sculptures, and handmade dolls. By documenting her life and creativity where she lived for 45 years, we're ensuring her story remains a lasting part of Vinings history."

The park includes high-quality, weather-resistant exhibit panels created in partnership with Kennesaw State University's Department of Museums, Archives, and Rare Books, placing her story and examples of her work within the very place she created her art. To honor Nellie's efforts to create art from cast-off materials, sculptor Allen Peterson created a bench for the space using scrap steel and other recycled materials. Decorative grass and a crushed stone pathway complete the space.

The project is supported by Cobb Landmarks & Historical Society; Georgia State Representative Sheila Jones; Nellie Mae Rowe family members Cheryl Mashack and Cathi Perry; High Museum of Art; and The Judith Alexander Foundation. Funding for the project comes from Georgia Humanities, in partnership with the Georgia Department of Economic Development, funding from the Georgia General Assembly, and private donors.

