

# A Teacher's Guide to *Sea Serpent by Pedro Silva*



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**Thank you, teachers,** for giving your students this wonderful opportunity. They will certainly enjoy the experience. You are creating memories of a lifetime, and Regions is proud to be able to help make this opportunity possible.



Jim Schmitz  
Area President  
Middle Tennessee





## Sea Serpent by Pedro Silva

*With gratitude and acknowledgement to conservator Shelley Reisman Paine's documentation and assessment.*

"Sea Serpent," built during 1980-81, is a ceramic tile sculpture set in reinforced concrete designed and constructed by New York artist Pedro Silva. It measures 12 x 36 x 61 feet. It takes the form of a huge sea serpent which appears to be partially submerged beneath the surface of the playground. The surface is covered in ceramic tiles of bright turquoise (swimming pool tile) and primary colors. The individual images are of sea creatures, clowns, popular personalities, clowns, animals, etc. The sculpture is the focal point of Fannie Mae Dees Park at 2400 Blakemore Avenue in Nashville.

The sculpture is a site-specific installation that depicts a mother "dragon" and baby dragon (completed the year following the initial main construction) emerging from the ground (representing the sea). A long curving bench represents the tail section. Five separate free-standing arched components make up the bodies of the two dragons. Sculpted tile heads are located at the tips of some of the serpent's scales.

The covering designs were created on-site and off-site by various community members. Volunteers were free to produce a design on any subject as long as they avoided religious or political imagery to keep the work free of controversy. After storage on contact paper they were placed by Silva to pleasing aesthetic effect. Thematically, each of the four body segments—not including the head that was primarily designed by Silva—feature elements and creatures of air, earth, sea, and imagination. On the serpent's third arch, next to its tail, is a portrait of Fannie Mae Dees, the community activist for whom the park is named, although its common name is "Dragon Park," deriving from the colloquial interpretation of the sculpture.

In need of repair by the late 90s, conservator Shelley Reisman Paine undertook the restoration of the beloved community icon, restoring its public safety and prognosis for longevity.

As critic Percy North wrote, "In places awkward and at others elegant and sophisticated this marvelous apparition fulfills the dreams of children young and old in the best of public art: of the people, by the people, and for the people."

It is a near-perfect artistic metaphor for community.

*Everyday I'm here another person comes to the fence and tells us their story about how they were involved with its construction.*

Shelley Reisman Paine, the conservator who restored the sculpture in 1999.



# The Artist

## Pedro Silva

Pedro Pablo Silva is a Chilean-born artist now living in New York City, who studied law and diplomacy at the Universidad de Chile. He came to the U.S. to study art at Columbia University and the Art Students League in 1959 on a Pan American scholarship.

In the 1960s Silva began working in public art that involved communities and continued refining his techniques for the next forty years. His method, adopted by artists all over the world, allows hundreds of untrained people to participate directly in a mosaic art project that achieves unity of design and pleasing aesthetics. It also overcomes class and economic barriers to instill a strong sense of community and shared values.



In 1960 he earned another scholarship, this time to Mexico, where he studied mural and fresco techniques with a disciple of Diego Rivera. Returning to New York, Silva built playground sculptures for many sites in Harlem and the Lower East Side of Manhattan with the hands-on participation of members of the community.

In 1972-74 Silva conceived, designed, and constructed a serpentine, free-form bench surrounding the Ulysses S. Grant National Memorial (Grant's Tomb). This project involved six professional artists and over 3,000 members of the local community who ranged from Columbia University professors to street gang members, from small children to seniors.

Similar to Nashville's "Sea Serpent," iron bars form the core structure covered with mesh wire and cement, which was then decorated with mosaic tiles. For the maximum number of people to participate but still achieve a unified aesthetic, Silva's method has people create their designs on brown paper, arrange the tiles over it, and then cover the design with clear contact paper. These individual mosaic art works are stored by theme (sea creatures, dinosaurs, mythological beings, flowers, etc.) until the artist determines a suitable placement.

Throughout the 1970s-1990s, Silva created works with community participation, primarily in New York City schools and parks. In 1979, he created a giant play sculpture in Edinburgh, Scotland, a 65 foot long by 20 foot high "Mermaid Fountain."

In 1980, Nashville's Metro Parks and Recreation invited him to design and construct a play sculpture in Fannie Mae Dees Park. He created a 200-foot-long "Sea Serpent" that undulates in and out of the ground, serving as its "water." The arches of the serpent's body originally had tire swings hanging from them. The tail curves around a playground area, forming a bench and climbing structure. More than 1,000 people created the tile designs covering the surface. In 1981 Nashville invited him to create three more art works: the "Baby Serpent," the Cardiovascular Center Mural, and another mosaic mural for the Eakin School. The "Sea Serpent's" wake inspired many artists to create using Silva's technique.

Since 1986 Silva has created electronic music with computers and synthesizers. He is also involved in computer art, developing 2-D and 3-D ideas (painting/sculpture), as well as animation.



# Fannie Mae Dees Park

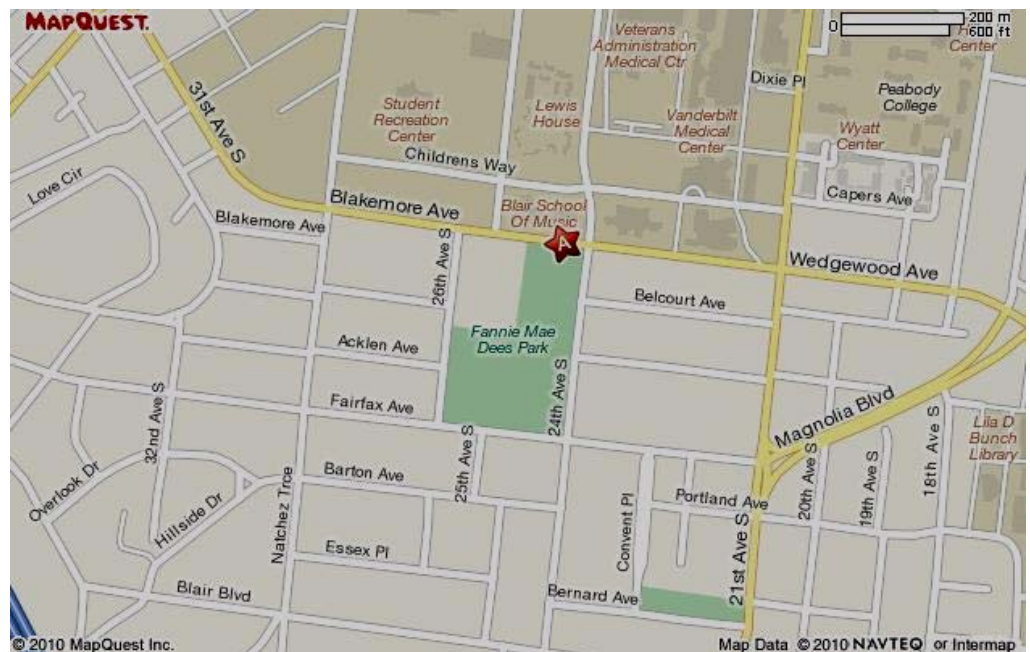


## Location of Sea Serpent by Pedro Silva

Fannie Mae Dees Park  
2401 Blakemore Avenue  
Nashville, TN 37212

The park is directly  
behind Eakin  
Elementary School and  
The Martin Professional  
Development Center.

Street parking is along  
24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup> Ave.





# Who Was Fannie Mae Dees?

The woman for whom a beloved community park is named was a champion of her community. Fannie Mae Dees lived with her invalid, widowed mother at 2113 Capers Avenue from the early 1940s until Fannie Mae died in her home at age sixty-one in 1978.

She devoted the last thirteen years of her life civilly and relentlessly opposing the destruction of her neighborhood for Vanderbilt University's expansion. A graduate of Jackson's Lambuth College who had done work toward her master's degree in science at Peabody College, Fannie Mae quit her job as a medical technologist to devote herself full-time to the struggle.

According to a *Tennessean* article by Jeff Walter, "To Dees, those who would force her and others from their homes were not evil; they merely had misplaced priorities."

Dees was found dead in her basement chair two days before Metro attorneys were to file suit to have her evicted. Surrounded by a houseful of clutter, debris, and furniture, Dees had become afraid of prowlers because so much of the neighborhood had already been sold to Vanderbilt and abandoned. Her thinking was to make the house look as if no one lived there. A neighbor added, "I think you can count her as one of the victims of urban renewal."

Dees is remembered by her popular community park, a peace offering from Vanderbilt. It is a place of healing, if not remembrance, that Fannie Mae Dees did not live to see.





# Treasure Hunt on the World Wide Web

- Find other works by the “Sea Serpent” artist Pedro Silva. Hint: New York City’s Ulysses S. Grant National Memorial (Grant’s Tomb) and Edinburgh, Scotland’s “Mermaid Fountain.”
- Find examples of mosaics from other countries. Compare and contrast these to Sea Serpent.
- What other materials are used in mosaics? Find examples:
  - Smalti (glass) mosaics in Italy, such as Ravenna, Italy’s San Vitale, Sant Apollinare Nuovo, and Sant Apollinare in Classe.
  - Small beach stones in Greece.
  - Large beach stones in Portugal
- Find a famous Spanish artist who used mosaics to create another park bench similar to the “Sea Serpent.” Hint: Antonio Gaudi in Barcelona’s Park Guell.

# Sea Serpent Facts & Voices

- The “Sea Serpent” is a mosaic sculpture made of iron supports, wire forms covered with concrete, and decorated on the outside with mosaic tiles.
- The primary artist was Pedro Silva, who was born in Chile and now lives in New York City.
- Over 1,000 people of all ages collaborated to create the approximately 850 individual designs that cover the “Sea Serpent.”
- The project was designed to heal a community that had been hurt by new development for Vanderbilt University.
- “Sea Serpent,” will be thirty years old in 2011. Over the years it has become a much-loved site for people of all ages to gather and play.



## Art can help heal bad situations.

*My fundamental philosophy about public art is that it should reflect the spirit of the community.*

Pedro Silva, designer and lead artist for the “Sea Serpent.”

*Anytime hundreds of people have their fingerprints on something it can become a symbol. And that’s what happened.*

Anne Roos, member of the Metro Parks Board who suggested the artist Pedro Silva create a community mosaic at Fannie Mae Dees Park, got the initial funding, and worked alongside Pedro throughout the project.

*I just believe that if an individual keeps hollering long enough somebody, someday is going to listen to me because I am right.*

Fannie Mae Dees, neighborhood activist who fought Vanderbilt’s destruction of residential housing. The park location of the “Sea Serpent” is named after her.



# Embellishing the Serpent

## Materials Needed:

Computer & monitor or screen to view photo CD, pencil and paper (and construction paper and glue for option 2)

## Em-bel-lish

–verb (used with object)

1. to beautify by or as if by ornamentation; adorn.
2. to enhance (a statement or narrative) with fictitious additions.

From Dictionary.com

## Option 1 Activity: (Invent a story to explain a “symbol” or decoration on the Sea Serpent.)

1. Imagine together the magical life of a sea serpent. What adventures has he or she experienced? What destinations visited? Is she alone or have a family? How old is he?
2. Set up the idea that the images on Silva’s Sea Serpent are symbols or souvenirs of the serpent’s adventures.
3. Assign (or let students select) a mosaic image on the Sea Serpent. Use the photo CD to display the images on a screen or monitor, or print out color copies of the mosaic designs.
4. You can restrict your images to relate to study areas of the curriculum (some examples are undersea creatures, ships, faces).
5. Have your students tell, act out, or write a story about how and why this creature came to have this symbol.

## Option 2 Activity: (Create a mosaic design that symbolizes a celebration or a rite of passage.)

1. Discuss the concept of a “rite of passage,” and/or the reasons why we celebrate. Some examples might be dressing yourself, starting school, getting a driver’s license, joining a sports team. Brainstorm additional ideas and why these are important.
2. What do we do to acknowledge or celebrate these events? Sometimes, artwork is created to commemorate celebrations and rites of passage.
3. Explore some mythical animals such as centaurs, winged horses, phoenix, the Loch Ness monster, or the Abominable snow man. What legends do we know about them? (Pets or fairytale animals would also work.)
4. Ask students to choose one creature for a small group project or individual activity.
5. What celebrations or rites of passage might this creature have experienced?
6. What symbols or pictures would represent these events?
7. Ask students to create designs using torn bits of construction paper and glue on 8.5 x 11 paper to represent the mosaic designs they would use to embellish their creature.



Examples of images found on “Sea Serpent”  
Photos by F. Lynne Bachleda



# You Are the Artist:

## Design your own Sculpture

### Materials Needed:

Paper, pencils & crayons or colored pencils. Modeling clay in different colors (optional).

**Discuss:** Why would an artist build a sculpture on a playground? What purposes does the “Sea Serpent” in Fannie Mae Dees Park serve? (Answers include: Climbing/ playing, benches, something interesting to look at, bringing together neighbors to improve their park and build friendships).

**Ask:** If the Sea Serpent wasn’t there, what other animal(s) could serve the same purposes? Imagine how the animal would have to change to accommodate these needs. How would the site change with a grouping of animals instead of just one?

**Activities:** Draw what your animal sculpture would look like. Create a first draft using graphite pencil and eraser, then copy over and add color and final details. Give your sculpture a title. (Option: If modeling clay is available, ask students to sculpt their animal shapes into a playground sculpture that serves the various purposes.)

### Extensions:

- Create a map of your school playground and determine the best location for this new sculpture.
- Create a community wall of the drawings with their titles, locations and the name of the artist. Include the purposes of the sculpture on each drawing.
- If it was your job to convince the principal that your playground needs a sculpture, what reasons would you present?
- Investigate the *scale* of the sculpture. How large would it need to be to fit in the park space? What size to comfortably serve as seating?

### Ideas:

- an elephant with a really long trunk for seating,
- a lioness lying on her side with a really long stomach,
- a family of lions with normal stomachs



# History of Mosaics

**The history of mosaic** goes back some 4,000 years or more. By the eighth century BC there were pebble pavements, using different colored stones to create patterns. It was the Greeks, in the four centuries BC, who raised the pebble technique to an art form, with precise geometric patterns and detailed scenes of people and animals. Many of the mosaics preserved at, for example, Pompeii were the work of Greek artists.

By 200 BC specially manufactured pieces ("tesserae") were being used to give extra detail and color. Using small tesserae, sometimes less than a quarter of an inch in size, meant that mosaics could imitate paintings. The expansion of the Roman Empire took mosaics further afield, although the level of skill and artistry was diluted. With the rise of the Byzantine Empire from the 5th century onwards, centered on Byzantium (now Istanbul, Turkey), the art form took on new characteristics, including Eastern influences in style and the use of special glass tesserae called smalti.

In the west of Europe, the Moors brought Islamic mosaic and tile art into the Iberian/Spanish peninsula in the 8th century, while elsewhere in the Muslim world, stone, glass and ceramic were all used in mosaics. In contrast to the figurative representations in Byzantine art, Islamic motifs are mainly geometric and mathematical.

In the rest of Europe, mosaic went into general decline throughout the Middle Ages. However a flourishing tile industry led to mosaic tiling patterns in abbeys and other major religious buildings.

In the 19th century there was a revival of interest, particularly in the Byzantine style, with buildings such as Westminster Cathedral and Sacre-Coeur in Paris. The Art Nouveau movement also embraced mosaic art. In Barcelona, Antoni Gaudi worked with Josep Maria Jujol to produce the stunning ceramic mosaics of the Guell Park in the first two decades of the 20th century. These used a technique known as trencadis in which tiles (purpose-made and waste tiles) covered surfaces of buildings. They also incorporated broken crockery and other found objects, a revolutionary idea in formal art and architecture.

Mosaic is in a healthy state in the early 21st century, despite a tendency for it to be thought of as more the work of craftspeople than artists. Perhaps this is a difficulty in accepting the fact that mosaics often have a dual function, for example as flooring, and also because it is a very accessible, non-elitist form of creativity. The field is rich with new ideas and approaches.



# Glossary

**Andamento** is the directional flow of the rows of tesserae, which can be in horizontal, circular, or sinuous lines.

**Ceramic tiles** are made from thin layers of fired clay. They are a popular mosaic material on account of the wide range of colors available and the fact that many types of tile can be easily cut and shaped with standard tools, such as tile cutters and tile nippers. Plain tiles of one or more colors can be arranged to form a mosaic such as a geometric pavement. Tiles can be purpose-made for a particular shape or color to use in mosaic work. Decorative tiles can also be used in combination with geometric tiles to great effect.

**Grout** is the substance which fills the gaps (joints or interstices) between tesserae in mosaics. One purpose of grout is to strengthen the work and make it longer-lasting by keeping water out of the joints. It also has the effect of completing a design. Un-grouted mosaic joints can be distracting to the eye. Most often a neutral color is chosen for the grout.

An **interstice** is the space between each tessera, which is filled with grout. Interstices are also called a grout joints. The width of the joints in a mosaic will affect the appearance of the design, and also the amount of grout needed.

A **tessera** is the basic unit of mosaic. It can be a small piece of glass or stone, or any other material suitable for mosaic work, cut to a square, rectangular, triangular or other regular shape. Originally tessera referred to the square or cubed pieces of stone in ancient classical mosaics, but now is used for pieces of any kind of mosaic material, whether they are ceramic, stone, pebbles, glass or some other substance. The plural is "tesserae".



# Further Activity Suggestions

## How many tiles are required to cover a surface area with designs?

- Using an image from the CD, assign arbitrary measurement values to the area, making them simple, whole numbers, for example 3 feet by 4 feet. Have students calculate how many tiles would be needed to cover this surface area.
- Be aware of grouted areas that will reduce the square footage of tile needed, but also know that tile is generally sold in 4, 6 and 12-inch squares.
- An advanced step would be to address the individual colors of any given design and estimate the number of tiles needed per color.

**Imagine the larger Sea Serpent has a message for the “baby” serpent. Write a letter or a poem to the little one.**

**For older students - Read about Fannie Mae Dees. Visit the park and take notes about the surrounding neighborhood. Debate the merits/demerits of destroying the neighborhood vs. making the park?**



## Web Sites of Interest

- [www.psilvastudios.com](http://www.psilvastudios.com). Web page of the “Sea Serpent” artist, Pedro Silva.
- [Classicalmosaics.com](http://Classicalmosaics.com). An overview of ancient mosaics with good illustrations.
- [Americanmosaics.org](http://Americanmosaics.org). Site sponsored by the Society of American Mosaic Artists (SAMA) Of particular interest may be “Expressing Oneself in Mosaics,” various artists writing about why they work in mosaics.
- [nyu.edu/classes/finearts/nyc/morningside/grant\\_detail1.html](http://nyu.edu/classes/finearts/nyc/morningside/grant_detail1.html). Images of the Silva benches which surround Grant’s tomb.
- [mosaicartsource.wordpress.com/2007/02/01/dragon-mosaic-sculpture-fannie-may-dees-park-nashville-tennessee/](http://mosaicartsource.wordpress.com/2007/02/01/dragon-mosaic-sculpture-fannie-may-dees-park-nashville-tennessee/). Article and images of Fannie Mae Dees Park’s “Sea Serpent.”