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## Leonard Knight 1931-2014

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BY JO FARB HERNÁNDEZ

# LEONARD KNIGHT 1931-2014

For almost 30 years, Leonard Knight applied brightly colored paint to a three-story adobe, mud-covered mountainside in the California desert near Niland. It's built on a barren squatters' territory called "Slab City," close to the Salton Sea.

Knight formed flowers, stairways, waterfalls and rivers to enhance numerous biblical verses proclaiming

Knight welcomed all comers, and despite his spiritual messages, resisted being pigeon-holed by organized religious groups.

his message, "God is Love." Hay bales, tree trunks and various found objects were also covered with this candy-colored adobe, forming a complex and compelling masterpiece.

Knight welcomed all comers, and despite his spiritual messages, resisted being pigeon-holed by organized



religious groups. Initially decried as an environmental hazard and an unauthorized use of state land, in 2002, the site was entered into the

Congressional Record as a National Treasure. Salvation Mountain attracted visitors from all over the world.

In December 2011, Knight was moved to an assisted living facility near San Diego. On

February 10, 2014, Knight died, at 82 years old.

Even before his departure from the mountain, Knight had not been addressing ongoing conservation needs with his usual energy and attention due to his declining health for the

past several years. Numerous cracks and peeling, fading paint mar the mountain's surface.

An *ad hoc* group of supporters, drawn in part from his neighbors at Slab City, formed a nonprofit organization with the hope of preserving Knight's masterpiece after the artist was no longer in residence. There remain unanswered questions about ownership as well as significant security and stabilization challenges. Nevertheless, the site remains open, and volunteers are working to ensure its survival in the immediate future. ☒



JO FARB HERNÁNDEZ, director of SPACES, is also the director of the Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery at San Jose State University in California.

Photographs by Jo Farb Hernández.

