



## This is Rome's Largest Public Art Work Since the Sistine Chapel

by Alina Cohen March 17, 2016



Marcello Melis

A 1,800-foot-long frieze will adorn the city's Tiber River.

A [new project](#) in Rome is about to open this April, and its sheer size puts even the Sistine Chapel to shame. The largest public art work in the city since the completion of Michaelangelo's masterpiece, William Kentridge's 1,800-foot-long, [33-foot-high frieze](#), entitled *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for the City of Rome*, will adorn the embankment walls along the Tiber River.

It's no easy feat. This project, according to artistic director Kristin Jones, is 33 years in the making. "I'm the mad woman that conceived this whole thing," she says. "It's the dream of my life." Jones won a Fulbright Scholarship to travel to Rome in 1983. She was interested in public art, and an instructor had advised her to see what the city had in store. Jones was stunned by Rome's beauty and architecture.

In 2004, Jones founded TEVERETERNO, a non-profit organization to produce cultural events in Rome and encourage artistic expression. She believes that contemporary art can be a vehicle for urban renewal and environmental awareness. As a New Yorker, Jones has seen organizations such as Creative Time and the Public Art Fund erect meaningful public work. She lamented the lack of similar funding in Rome and

decided to create her own “urban place-making project.”

But where, in the whole city of Rome, to focus her efforts? Jones quickly became captivated with the Tiber River and with one portion in particular. “The river is a fantastic, serpentine meander,” she says. Yet, it was “completely neglected. Totally derelict.” She was thrilled to discover an uncharacteristically straight stretch the same length and width as an ancient Greek arena. Struck by its majesty and potential, she began considering the site’s artistic possibilities.



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She determined that William Kentridge, the South African artist known worldwide for his drawings, prints, and video work, was the only man for the job. Kentridge may be best known for his stop-motion films and his five-channel installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a few years ago, *The Refusal of Time*, which mediates on time, space, colonialism, and industry through both sculpture and projection. If there was one person who could bring contemporary art alive in Rome, a city so rich with history both glorious and unsavory, it was he. “Kentridge is so brilliant,” Jones says. “His work makes me weep.” Over the years, at art gatherings and public celebrations, Jones sought out Kentridge and brought up the idea of collaborating on a project together. Over 10 years after their first meeting in Rome in 2001, when both were attending the Norton Lectures at Harvard, he told Jones what he wanted to do.

Initially, the pair considered projection work along the embankment walls. That method was expensive, though, and they settled on a “drawing” using an unusual technique devised by Jones: holding large stencils to the sullied walls and then power washing them, black and white figures emerged. The all-natural process allowed the work to slowly fade over time without altering the structures.

Kentridge considered what types of images would resonate with this method, at this site. He noted that the area embodied Rome's contradictions. On one side stood the ghetto and on one side the Vatican. Rome at its worst and at its most imposing. Kentridge wanted to reconcile the city's accomplishments and its infractions—often, the two were inextricably intertwined. The project “exploded into the entire history of Rome and all of its triumphs and all of its tragedies.”



Marc Shoul

Soon, Kentridge and Jones's team began choosing the images and creating the stencils for *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for the City of Rome*. The process required over three years of research by scholars, consultants, and volunteers and amassed an archive of over 300 images from which Kentridge was able to choose. The final frieze will depict over 80 figures from antiquity to present, in addition to mythological icons, in the form of a procession along the walls. Jones emphasizes the “for” in the title—she and Kentridge are creating a gift for the city, which has given so much to scholars, art lovers, travelers, and locals for so long.

A spectacular project deserves a spectacular celebration, and during the opening of *Triumphs and Laments*, from April 21-22, the renowned composer Philip Miller will debut a theatrical musical performance that incorporates local performers along with music from both the Italian folk tradition and the city's multifaceted immigrant population. Two processional marching bands will walk in a procession as light shines on their feet and their shadows dance on top of the power-washed walls.

The dates coincide with the city's Jubilee celebration and the symbolic founding of the city of Rome. Jones speaks about tourists that “come and take and go.” Rome has been a “pilgrimage site for joy and for spirit

and for food.” While we replenish ourselves, we often don’t give anything back to the city. As Jones says, “Rome deserves it.”

