



# Tile Heritage Foundation

for research and preservation of ceramic surfaces

Founded in July 1987 Tile Heritage is celebrating its 34th anniversary this year. Supporters like YOU... members, major contributors, industry sponsors, generous grantors... everyone... have made possible the continued fulfillment of the Foundation's mission to Document and Preserve tile history in the U.S., both past and present. THANK YOU!

## *E-News for Spring 2021*

### *Here's What's Below*

RTK's Automotive Museum  
Mural Project

With a little help from our friends:  
Cambridge Faience

Hillside School's Fountain Revived

Springing Up!  
A New Online Auction of  
Artisan Garden Planters

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Mary Kennedy and Richard Keit at the project site in Balboa Park in San Diego. 2021

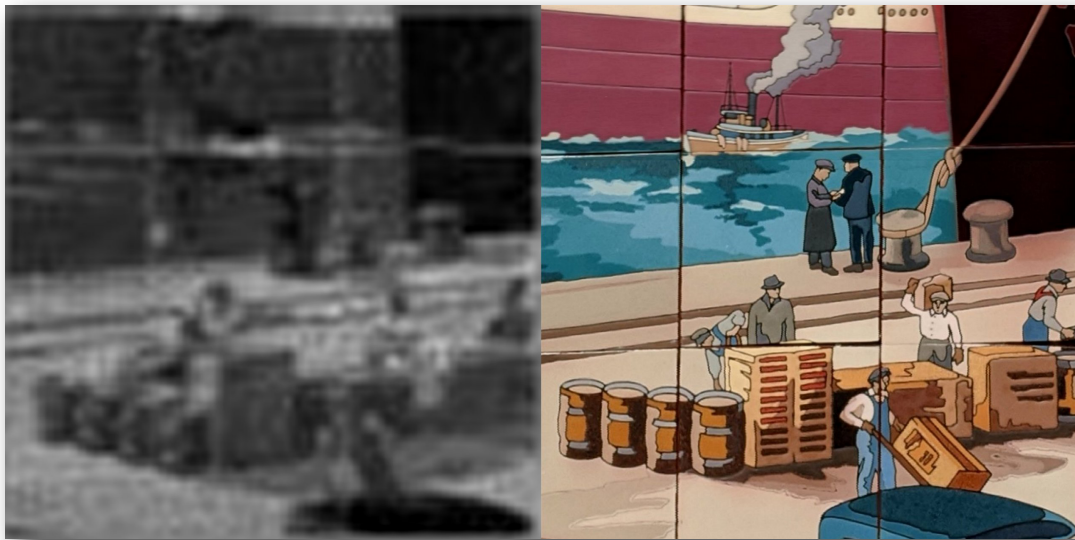
All photos courtesy of RTK Studios

## **Automotive Museum Facade Mural Project**

*By Mary Kennedy and Richard Keit of RTK Studios, Ojai, California*

The impressive California State Building was constructed for the 1935 California Pacific International Expo in Balboa Park, San Diego, CA. The convex facade sported four 8x18' murals painted on fiberboard panels by Juan Larrinaga depicting the march of progress in Commerce, Natural Beauty, Agriculture and Industry. Sadly, the panels did not last beyond the end of the expo. The bare building, now The Automotive Museum, is undergoing rehabilitation spearheaded by The Committee of One Hundred to restore its erstwhile grandeur.

## Automotive Museum Mural...



Black and white photos (at left) were provided as references though considering the sizable scale of the murals most historical details sadly were illegible.

In December 2015 Richard Keit and Mary Kennedy of RTK Studios were commissioned to recreate the once prestigious murals in durable ceramic tile. Black and white photos were provided as references though considering the sizable scale of the murals most historical details were illegible. Careful computer manipulations were necessary though it risked degrading precious visual information. Sleuthing out the details involved endless months of research leaving much to be conjured up in house creating a shared rendition of the final artwork. One rather frustrating obstacle, a strong vertical, dark and muddled area on the “Industry” mural at long last came to represent the monumental Colorado River Aqueduct, constructed from 1933-39. All factors needed to be historically accurate to this era heralding the end of the Great Depression. RTK Studios' line art phase for the project was completed February 2017.



Richard is employing the *cuerda seca* tile making technique. The line artwork is photo exposed onto silkscreens and a waxy medium is used to transfer the lines onto ceramic tiles.



## Automotive Museum Mural...

Employing the *cuerda ceca* tile making technique, the line artwork is photo exposed onto silkscreens and a waxy medium is used to transfer the lines onto ceramic tiles.



At left: the screen has been successful in transferring the line drawing to the tile surface. Above: Mary bulbs the various colored glazes onto the tiles. Below: A portion of one of the murals glazed and ready for firing.

Four large silkscreens were needed per mural, excluding the upper 24 square feet of sky on each. 576 square feet of tile in total. It was a precise and physically demanding task to match each screened section perfectly to the next before glazing could begin.

Simultaneously, the glaze palette was being developed based on RTK Studios' knowledge

of historical colors from this time period. As a nod to this bygone era an artistic decision was made to add a burnished tint of antiquity to the overall pallet. Subtle variation is key to these nature inspired murals. The sky, for instance, has seven separate dark to light glazes creating that characteristic Southern California haze. The far back mountains nearly disappear into the atmospheric mist, more akin to the vapor than to earth. No color references for the original murals were available. The black and white photos offered only light and dark clues.



## Automotive Museum Mural...

Over their 40 years of making architectural art tile, RTK Studios has amassed an extensive glaze repertoire from which to draw and an ongoing effort to create custom formulas that can cross blend with various raw minerals and complex glaze bases. Developing and testing are a familiar routine. The glazes, in a broad sense, are like liquid glass and applied as a painter would use paint. Each color or shade variation is a different formula that reveals its color only in its fired melted state (imagine painting in the dark!). Predominately satin matte textured glazes were developed that mature while forming tiny crystals during the cooling cycle of the kilns.



Richard begins the formulation and testing of over 400 glazes, of which 173 were chosen for the murals.

The total firing cycle for the tiles takes approx. 60 hours during which careful monitoring of the kiln is essential to balance the top to bottom temperature zones to within a degree or two, especially as it nears the peak of 1980F. In the ceramics world, a feat in itself! A slow cooling is important to prevent cracking from thermal shock. Luckily, the kiln gods were auspicious throughout this phase of the project. Working in concert from mural to mural, most every surface in the studio was occupied with this project in all stages of glazing. Alas, the largest studio table holds shy of four rows, barely offering a glimpse of the whole. The quietude of the pandemic lock-down eliminated distraction allowing the husband and wife artistic team to toil and squabble in peace.



A likeness of how the four murals will appear on the Automotive Museum in San Diego's Balboa Park when unveiled in October 2021.

Statistics: 576 square feet of 12 x 12 tiles, each weighing 5.3 lbs. Total weight: 3,053 lbs. Of the 400+ glazes formulated and tested, 173 different glazes were used on the murals.

RTK Studios' artistic addition to the building's rehabilitation was completed in May 2020. Installation of the tile murals began March 2021. Work remains to complete the total rehabilitation of the building with the unveiling tentatively scheduled in October, 2021. It will be with great excitement to finally see these beautiful murals in their entirety framed by such a magnificent structure.



## Automotive Museum Mural...



Before ...



After ....



More panel details







The Nichols' residence in Medford, Massachusetts designed by architect Frank Blodgett in 1911

## With a little help from our friends...

*From Kit Nichols:*

I write with the hope that you might be able to help me figure out who made the tiles in our fireplace surround. Our house in Medford, MA is an American Foursquare built in 1911. The tiles around the fireplace are matte green and terracotta colored. We live within 10-15 miles of the Grueby Faience factory site in Revere, MA, and our tiles seem much closer to Grueby tiles than Low Art Tiles, which were made even closer to us. Could you help? I have made the assumption that the tiles are local in origin, but that may be totally

wrong. Someone suggested they may be Batchelder tiles, which seemed too far afield to me until I remembered that the original owners also had a Murano chandelier sent from Italy for the front hall....distance clearly didn't deter them! Your advice would be greatly appreciated.

Kit, greetings and thank you for contacting Tile Heritage

Richard Mohr, the preeminent tile historian from Illinois, identified the tile from your images. They are Cambridge Faience from the Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Co. located in Covington, Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Your exact mantel is No. 48 illustrated on page 31 in the company's "Cambridge Faience Mantels" catalog published in 1905. Your decorative insert F 12 (below) is also illustrated on page 37 and is referred to as "plastic relief" as it was produced by pressing moist clay into a plaster mold.



6x6 Cambridge Faience. Design F 12.



Cambridge Faience produced by Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Co. of Covington, Kentucky (1889-1985).



## With a little help ...

*More from Kit Nichols:*

Thank you so much! I can't tell you how thrilled I am to have this information. I've wondered about the fireplace tiles since we moved into the house in 2012. The journey of researching them has been really fun, and I now understand why tiles can be addictive. I've started collecting Low Art Tiles for our kitchen renovation because I think it would be really neat to include tiles that were made locally, and I'm finding it's really hard not to go overboard.



Residence of Frank and Nellie Stowell, c. 1915. Nellie relaxes on the front steps.

As for pictures of the house, I'm happy to share! The house was built in 1911 for Frank and Nellie Stowell. Frank worked for the railroad, and he was also an inventor who held patents for various devices relating to railroad systems, including the ventilation system used in the elevated railroad system in Boston and New York. According to local records, the architect was Frank Blodgett, and the cost of building the house was \$5,500.



The parlor of Frank and Nellie Stowell, c. 1915. Note the mantel in the background.

I'm attaching photos of the house and the fireplace sometime circa 1915. The interior shot is dark, but it's how I knew the fireplace was original. (When I started researching the house, I tracked down a great grandson who miraculously had interior and exterior photos, though he had never been inside the house until he came to see us.)

Please also extend my thanks to Mr. Mohr for lending his expertise. I'm trying to document the house as thoroughly as possible so that

when the day comes when we sell it, future owners will understand what they have here and hopefully preserve it. Knowing the provenance of the fireplace feels like a way of protecting it. Thank you for your help in doing that.

# Hillside School's Fountain Revived

*From Riley Doty, Doty Tile Company*



Original water fountain with stainless steel basin.



Original fountain with stainless basin removed.

Here's my latest. I felt like I hit the trifecta because I followed Victorian and International Style installations with work on a 1920s Spanish tiled fountain - three distinctly different genres.

The former Hillside School in Berkeley is being amazingly restored for repurposing. A 1920s hallway fountain was installed as a memorial to two students who died of Scarlet Fever. At some point the original basin apparently had issues and was replaced with a stainless steel basin laid on top, mostly covering the worst of the tilework. It was pretty crude.

I chopped off the top and put in new box caps and ceramic mosaic, installing a new porcelain basin.



Finished! Doty Tile wins the "trifecta"!



A **NEW** Artisan Garden Planter **ONLINE AUCTION**  
 is **SPRINGING UP!**  
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