

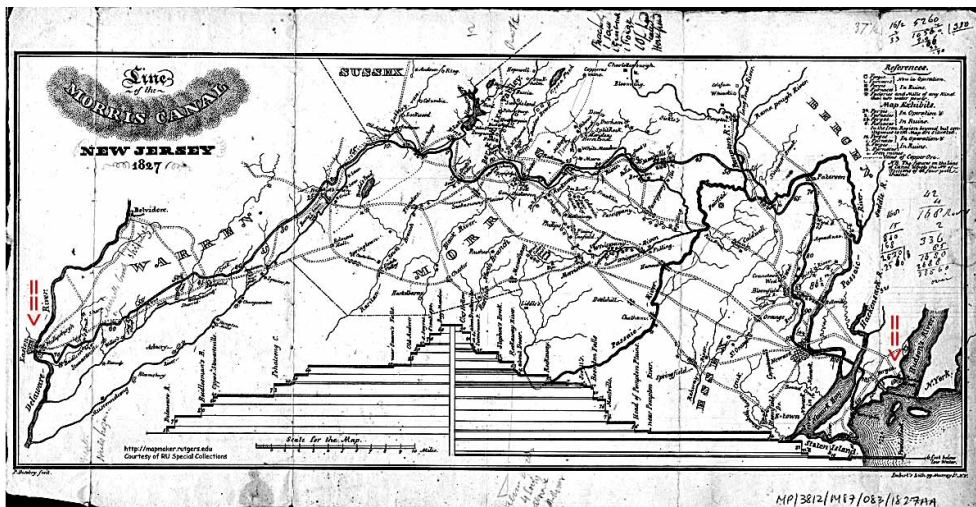
NEWARK'S WPA TILE MURALS: "FINE ART IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE"

Michael Padwee



A section of the Morris Canal in Waterloo, N.J in 2008. (Photo courtesy of Speedfox51; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Canal_Section%7EWaterloo.jpg)

The Morris Canal was completed to Newark in 1831 and to Jersey City in 1836. "The canal's 102-mile meander across northern New Jersey, from Phillipsburg to Jersey City, was walked by every mule driver for every team that pulled a canal boat from 1831 to 1924. ...The Morris Canal was the brainchild of Morristown businessman George Macculloch, who envisioned a commerce route that could surmount North Jersey's rugged terrain to ship coal, iron ore, farm produce and other products across the state. To conquer an unprecedented 1,674-foot change in elevation - 760 feet from the Delaware River at Phillipsburg up to Lake Hopatcong, the summit level, and 914 feet back down to tidewater at Newark Bay - the Morris Canal used a series of locks and a new innovation, the inclined plane. Operated from 1831 to 1924, the Morris Canal was considered an engineering marvel of its time, but, by the end of its life, it had been surpassed by railroads as a shipping route. ...the inclined plane was adapted for the Morris Canal and used to conquer changes of elevation anywhere from 35 feet to 100 feet. The canal boats were floated onto a cradle car, which was pulled out of the water, then up or down on iron rails to the next section of canal." (<http://www.njskylands.com/hsmorriscanal.htm>)



Map of the Morris Canal. Image in the public domain, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1827_Morris_Canal.jpg.

“On the canal's western end, at Phillipsburg, a cable ferry allowed Morris Canal boats to cross the Delaware River westward to Easton, Pennsylvania, and travel up the Lehigh Canal to Mauch Chunk, in the anthracite coal regions, to receive their cargoes from the mines. From Phillipsburg, the Morris Canal ran eastward through the valley of the Musconetcong River, which it roughly paralleled upstream to its source at Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey's largest lake. From the lake the canal descended through the valley of the Rockaway River to Boonton, eventually around the northern end of Paterson's Garret Mountain, and south to its 1831 terminus at Newark on the Passaic River. From there it continued eastward across Kearny Point and through Jersey City to the Hudson River.”
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morris_Canal

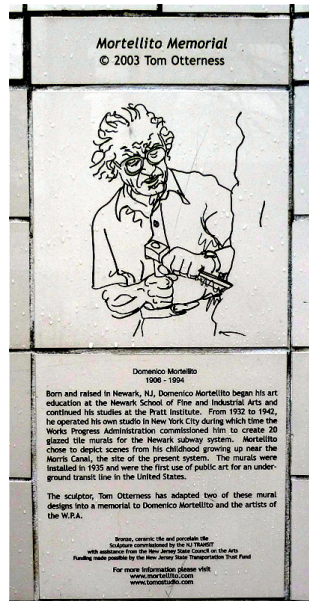


Map of the Jersey City terminal of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, circa 1910, with a diagram of the terminus of the Morris Canal. (Map courtesy of JimIrwin; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lehigh_Valley_Jersey_City_Terminal.png) Another map of the Morris Canal in Jersey City may be accessed at: http://www.canalsocietynj.org/Ron_Rice/jerseycitymap.pdf.

“The Morris Canal was...brought into Jersey City from a ravine at Newark Bay, near present day Route 440, cut between Mercer Park and Currie's Woods and went on to New York Bay at 52nd Street, Bayonne for a total of over 109 miles. In Jersey City, a dry channel, forty feet wide, was dug from the Hackensack River to the Canal, or Little Basin, in the city. Lock gates at the end of the canal allowed water to pass through the canal with the assistance of a pumping station near the Hackensack River. ...With the development of the railroads in the northeast, the use of the Morris Canal declined. The Jersey City extension of the canal on the Hudson River waterfront remained the only viable part of the canal after 1871. That year the Lehigh Valley Railroad leased the Morris Canal to eliminate competition. In 1922, New Jersey took over the canal, except in Philipsburg and Jersey City, and drained it in 1924. Today, Marin Boulevard runs parallel to Canal Street to the north, where the Morris Canal ran along the Jersey City waterfront.” (http://www.njcu.edu/programs/jchistory/pages/M_Pages/Morris_Canal.htm)

[*This may be slightly inaccurate as there are preservationist groups that have been cleaning up the canal towpaths, conducting tours, and publicizing the canal's history. http://www.canalsocietynj.org/Ron_Rice/morrisjc.html, <http://www.njskylands.com/hsmorriscanal.htm>]

“In 1933 and 1934, during the period of ‘The Great Depression,’ the Federal government's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was organized by the Civil Works Administration. The general purpose of the program was ‘to give work to artists by arranging to have competent representatives of the profession embellish public buildings.’ This program lasted less than one year, yet it provided employment for approximately 3,700 artists who created nearly 15,000 works of art. In 1935, a similar project, the Federal Art Project (FAP) was established by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Federal Art Project continued until 1943, when the beginning of World War II...changed economic priority to the war effort and the Nation was experiencing economic recovery.” (<http://www.wpamurals.com/history.html>) One such artist who benefitted from the WPA/FAP was Domenico Mortellito (1906-1994), who created a series of tile murals depicting life along the Morris Canal for the Newark Subway System (now NJ Transit's Newark Light Rail). From 1929 to 1935 the Morris Canal in Newark was drained and filled in so that the Newark Subway System could be built partially along its route. The murals “were among the earliest subway art to be completed and installed in this country. ...The scenes on the subway panels show activities that relate to the old Morris Canal and [to] the building of the subway.” (*New Deal Art: New Jersey*, Exhibition Catalog, Robeson Center Gallery, Rutgers in Newark, Published by the Newark College of Arts and Sciences of Rutgers University, 1980)



Part of the tile Mortellito Memorial at Newark's Branch Brook Park Station, 2011. Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee.

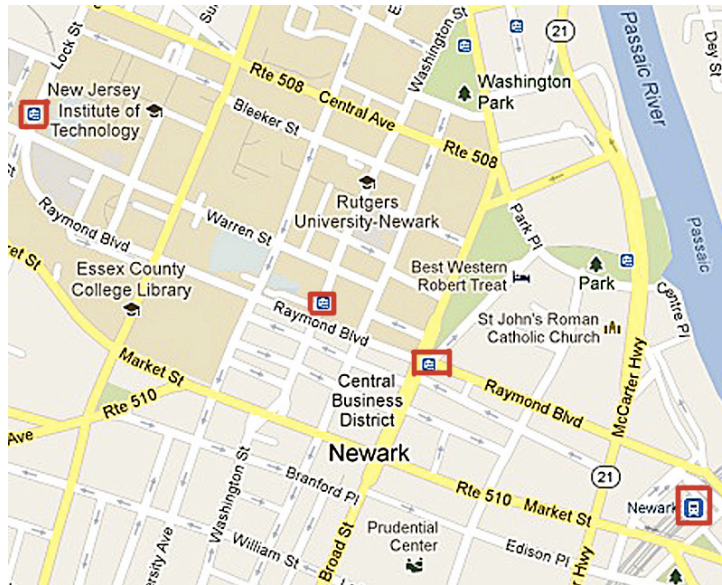


The tiles of the Mortellito Memorial have not fared as well as the original tiles in the WPA murals.



Domenico Mortellito "...was born in 1906 in Newark, N.J. and died in 1994. His art career began when he was able to graduate a year early from the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts in 1922 and enter Pratt Institute, graduating with a historic award in 1926. He operated his own studio in New York City from 1927 to 1942, during which time he participated in the W.P.A. and T.R.A.P. public programs. The work he produced included murals for World's Fair pavilions, churches, luxury liner ships and trains, architectural decorations for public buildings, sculpture, and furniture. From 1942 to 1945, Mortellito worked in the Pentagon, both as a civilian and as a lieutenant in the Air Force. He designed exhibits, supervised graphic presentations, and designed booklets and brochures. From 1945 to 1979, he worked as a design advisor for the DuPont Company designing exhibits and the 1965 World's Fair Pavilion. He designed marketing materials and product symbols, and supervised the design department. As the chairman of the DuPont Color Council, Mortellito developed innovative printing processes. As an artist, he experimented with a wide range of potential art materials: Lucite, nylon, Teflon, Delrin, Corian, rigid urethane, potassium titanate, machine and automobile lacquer finishes, and Lexan. He considered himself a comprehensive artist encompassing various and innovative mediums." (<http://www.domenicomortellito.com/biography.html>)

From the left, the four “City Subway” stations with WPA tile murals: Warren/Lock Street, Washington



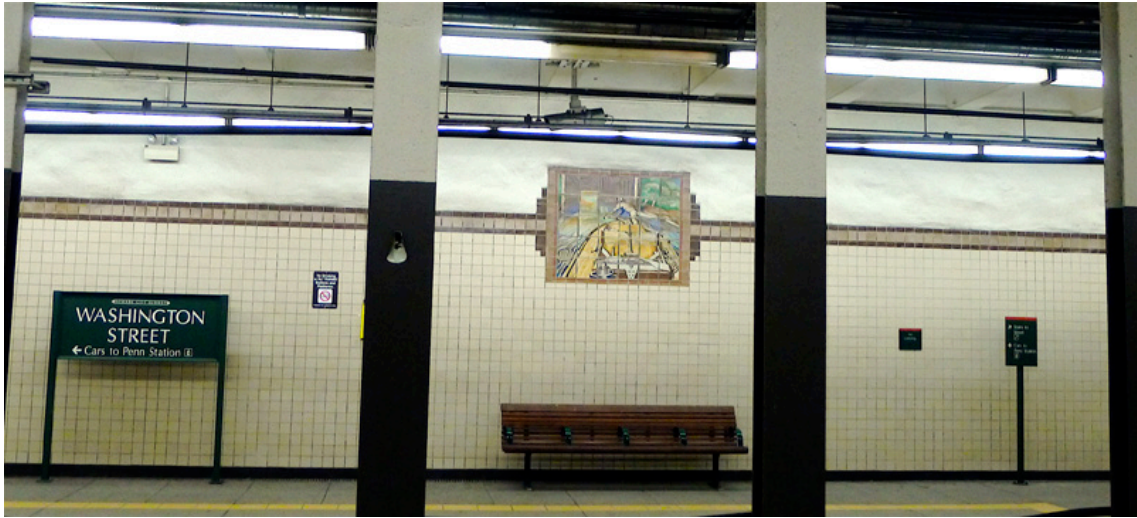
St./Raymond Blvd., Broad St./Military Park, and Pennsylvania Station. Map courtesy of maps.google.com.

In 1935 Mr. Mortellito was commissioned by the WPA to create murals for the Newark City Subway System. “The Newark City Subway runs on the former bed of the Morris Canal... . Abandoned by 1924, the canal had become a mosquito-infested trough and a barrier to the flow of increasing downtown traffic. Where barges had once transported the products of Newark's factories to points west, trains would now move people underground, allowing motor traffic on the new Raymond Boulevard above. Public Service had already built an extensive transit center on Park Place, providing a convenient transfer point to trolleys and buses going virtually anywhere in the state. Subway construction began in 1929 and was completed in 1935, with an extension to Penn Station finished a few years later. Beyond the Warren Street station that serves Rutgers and NJIT, the line goes to surface, making one grade crossing and hugging the edge of Branch Brook Park before terminating at Grove Street in Bloomfield.” (Sue Kaufmann, *Hidden New Jersey* blog, (<http://www.hiddennj.com/2012/10/art-and-history-below-streets-of-newark.html>))



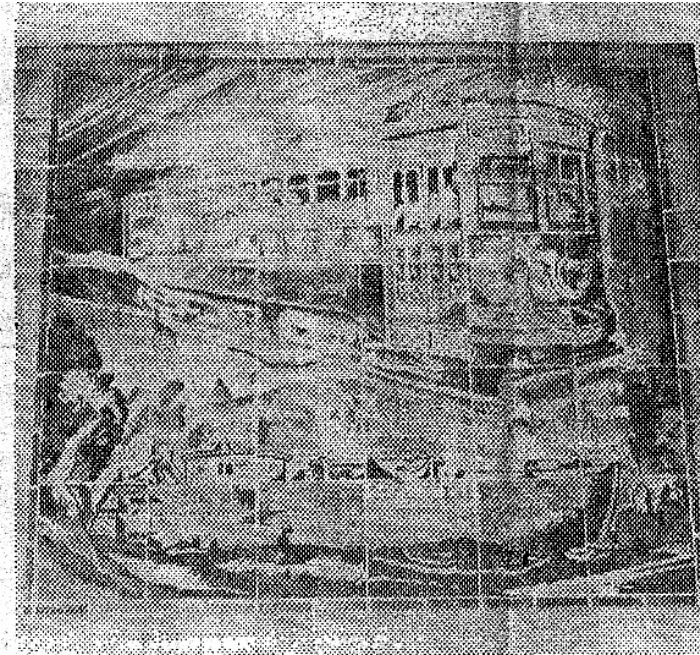
One of the few “City Subway” kiosks still to be found at a station entrance--at Washington Street. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)

In an undated, unattributed article written by Domenico Mortellito, probably in the late 1930s-1940s, and sent to me by tile historian and conservationist [Riley Doty](#), Mr. Mortellito stated that "The subway has a body colored tile throughout which is a soft warm grey. There are different color bands in each station, with the decorative [Morris Canal] panels... . The station names are done to harmonize with the concrete vaulted soffits. ...The tiles were made by the underglazed method and were executed in the kilns of the [Mueller \[Mosaic\] Tile Company](#) at Trenton, New Jersey. Mr. Ralph Smilie [sic.] was the construction engineer[,] who is at present working on the Hudson Tunnel [i.e., the Lincoln Tunnel]." ("Tile Panels In Subway At Newark New Jersey" by Domenico Mortellito, unknown periodical, unknown September date, pp. 16-17) Mortellito later said that he, Mortellito, "...baked the tiles, painted them and then placed them in a kiln at 2,600 degrees. When cooled...the colors appeared with an 'underglazed' protection. ...Other than the subway murals, Mortellito's other major designs in Newark are decorations at Arts High School, where he graduated. That's how Newark officials contacted him about doing the subway murals... ." (Kenneth Reid, "Artist's subway legacy survives underground", *Newark Star Ledger*, July 4, 1980)



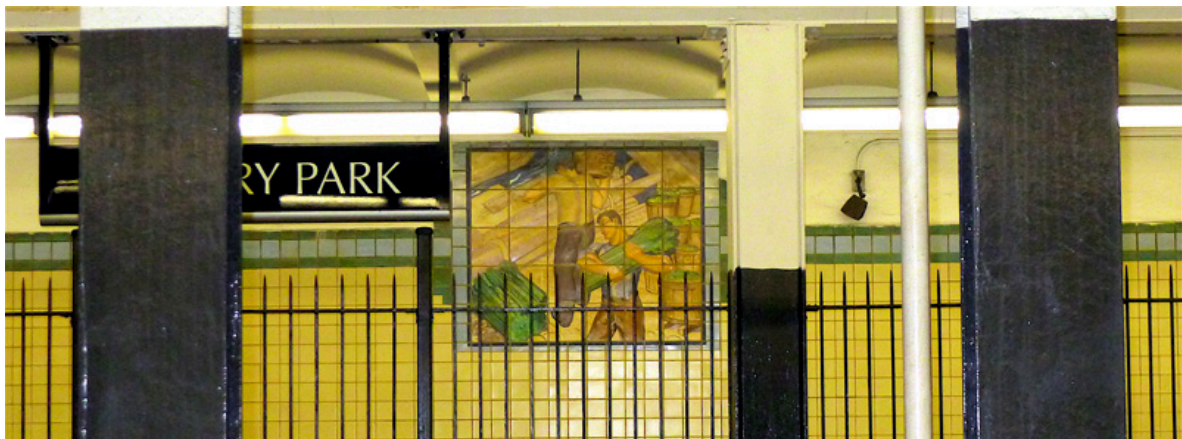


The murals--about two different per station--are on the walls of the underground Light Rail Stations at Pennsylvania Station, Broad Street (Military Park), Washington Street and Warren Street (at Lock Street). Additionally, there is a tile mural memorial to Domenico Mortellito in the above-ground Branch Brook Park Light Rail Station, which, at one time, was the last stop on the Newark City Subway. I have discovered a reference to a ninth mural that illustrates a canal boat and a subway car, but I have been unable to locate it.



(A "ninth" mural from: Kenneth Reid, "Artist's subway legacy survives underground", *Newark Star Ledger*, July 4, 1980; courtesy of the Newark Museum Library)

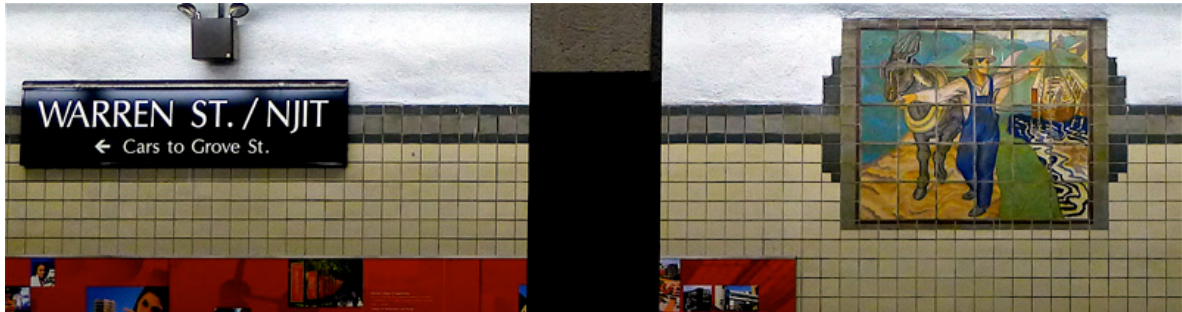
Although the newspaper photo and article indicates this is a Mortellito tile mural, at one time New Jersey Transit printed and sold note cards of eight different Mortellito murals in the subway system. It is possible that this ninth mural, if it still exists, is hidden behind a wall and knowledge of it has been lost.



This mural is behind a fence that keeps the public away.

Each set of station murals is duplicated and installed on both sides of the tracks, and at least one station has three copies of one mural. In an article titled "Art Tiles in the Prairie

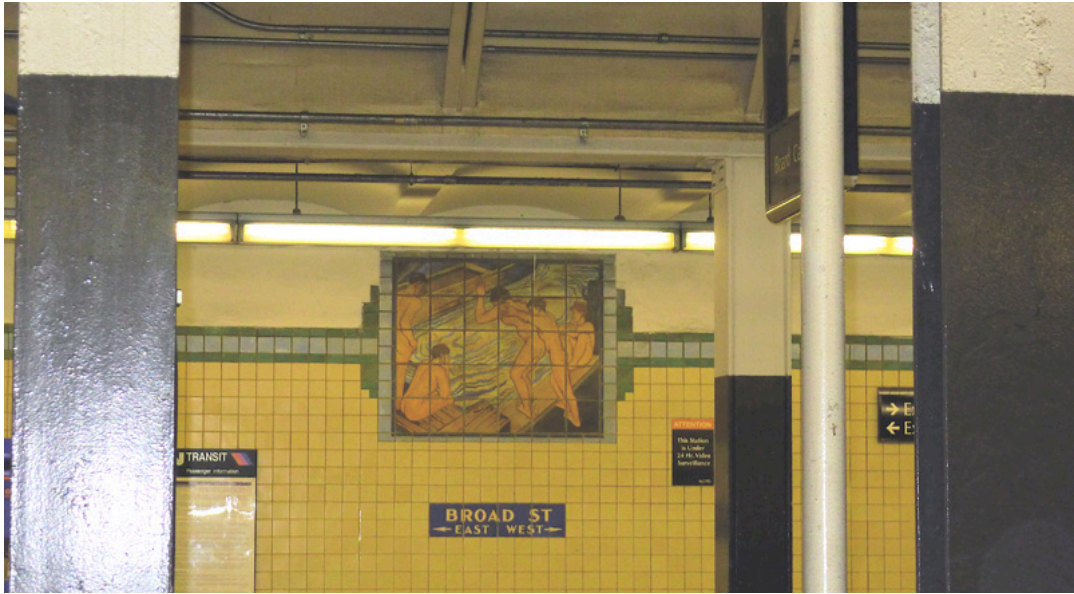
School: Part II”, ceramics and architectural historian Richard Mohr discusses the duplicated Teco art tile murals (i.e., American Terra Cotta Company, Chicago) found at the Ricker residence (design completed in August 1911) in Grinnell, Iowa and at the H. M. Mess residence (design completed in June 1912) in Winnetka, Illinois: “Mystery one: Why two sets of [the same] tiles? It is a common, though not universal, tile-making practice when dealing with large scale, site-specific installations to make back-ups of tiles as a hedge against kiln disasters... . . .if things go wrong in the kiln, one can’t simply substitute stock items from storage for the destroyed elements. If, for example, all the tiles in one saggar--a protective fireclay box--are destroyed..., it is a good idea to have a complete set of tiles firing elsewhere in the kiln... . [...Mohr’s] conjecture is that...Teco executed two complete sets of tiles as a hedge against disaster, but...all or virtually all of the tiles came out fine...[leaving] two usable sets of tiles...[to be installed in two different houses.]” (*Journal of the American Art Pottery Association*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Winter 2012, p. 19)





There don't seem to be any existing written records or plans for these murals, but it looks like Mortellito planned to install duplicates in every station on each side of the tracks. I also asked Professor Mohr how an artist or a tile company might duplicate the same image on multiple tile panels. He wrote: "These Mortellito murals are magnificent, but the detail of the [photos] at their website [the Domenico Mortellito Foundation website at <http://www.domenicomortellito.com/public-works.html>] is not sufficient to make a determination of how the designs were repeated. (Maybe that could not be determined even with really detailed images.) My guess is that the basic outlines – and there is a fair amount of outlining – is done by pouncing -- coal dust daubed through pinhole perforations in a sheet of paper that is used as a template for the repeating design. This gives the right proportion and contours – enough for the artist to work with, esp[ecially] if he or she also has a color sketch of the design to look at while painting on the glazes. The artist connects the dots and fills in the areas by hand. This is how frescos are done (it has virtues even if the final product is one-off., as it allows a small sketch to be scaled up.) I suspect that it is how the Ricker/Mess house tile murals were done." (Email from Richard Mohr to Michael Padwee dated January 15, 2013 and titled "Re: Question about duplicate murals")

I also asked this and other questions to the people at the Mortellito Foundation website, but no one has answered.





Another historian who has written extensively about Herman Mueller and the Mueller-Mosaic Company, Lisa Taft, said it was common practice for tile companies to make duplicates of large commissions. Also, “when the murals were being done the Newark Museum had an exhibit showing the tile process and the plans. They described the process and had tile and glaze samples. I think they have one of the panels but they also had sample panels that were made for the exhibit.” (Email from Lisa Taft to Michael Padwee dated 10 January 2013)

A scan of a slide of the tile mural (Object 35.113) commissioned by the Newark Museum from the Mueller Mosaic



Company for the Museum's exhibit in 1935. (Photo courtesy of the Newark Museum).

This exhibition took place at the Newark Museum in 1935. The Museum commissioned an extra mural--a scene on the Morris Canal--which was gifted to the Museum by Herman Carl Mueller. The mural consisted of “30 tiles, [each] 8 ¼ inch[es] square, set in plaster on [a] wooden frame. [It f]orms [a] colored picture of [a] man at [the] tiller of [a] canal boat in [the] foreground which has just come out from under [a] bridge.” (Description of Newark Museum Object 35.113)



(Pennsylvania Station picture post card courtesy of <http://www.cardcow.com>)





Many years after the murals were installed, when asked "...what should people today learn from these long-ago scenes of a canal that exists only as the bed for a subway few people know about and even fewer ever use? Mr. Mortellito...answer[ed]...'They would learn what had once gone on here,...but they would also realize that fine art is an important part of everyday life.'" (Anthony DePalma, "About New Jersey", *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 25, 1991, p. 15)

I would like to thank Ms. Angela Battle, Revenue Contract Administrator, and Allen Kratz, Director of Revenue Contract Programs, NJ Transit, for their help in obtaining a photo permit. My friends, [Marie Lawrence and Jan Braverman](#), for telling me about the Newark WPA murals and helping me take the photos (their website is still partially active and interesting, but hasn't been kept up-to-date). Sue Kaufmann of the [Hidden New Jersey blog](#); Tile conservationist, [Riley Doty](#); historian, Lisa Taft, who has written extensively about the Mueller-Mosaic Company; Architectural and ceramic historian Richard Mohr; and Mr. William A. Peniston, the Librarian of the Library at the [Newark Museum](#), who was very helpful in locating information about Mortellito, his murals and the Mueller Mosaic Company.

LINKS:

[Riley Doty](#)

[The Newark Museum](#)

["Hidden New Jersey" Blog](#)

The Morris Canal

<http://www.njskylands.com/hsmorriscanal.htm>,

http://www.njcu.edu/programs/jchistory/pages/M_Pages/Morris_Canal.htm,

http://www.canalsocietynj.org/Ron_Rice/morrisjc.html,

http://www.flickr.com/groups/themorriscanalcrossedhere/pool/with/3384892664/#photo_3384892664

[Cardcow.com](#)