

ARCHITECTURAL CERAMICS OF HENRY VARNUM POOR

Michael Padwee

One day as I walked along East 72nd Street in Manhattan, I passed a building with some ceramic roundels under the shallow ground floor arches on its facade. I took a few photos, wrote down the address, and figured I'd look the building up sometime in the future.



Color photos of this building taken in 2012 by Michael Padwee.

Two years later I did an internet search for 160 East 72nd Street and up popped one of Christopher Gray's informative "Streetscape" columns: The apartment house at "...160 East 72nd Street, is among the most unusual in New York. That's Kingdon Gould's custom-built quarters... . Kingdon Gould was a grandchild of the multimillionaire financier Jay Gould, widely known, and denounced, for manipulating gold and railroad stocks. ...In 1927, while living in an old brownstone at 160 East 72nd Street, [...Kingdon] sold out, along with two neighbors, to the Arezzo Realty Corporation. This was actually [...Kingdon's] own company[,...and his and his wife's intent

was] to build another house of their own — in the sky. In 1927, The New York Times carried an advertisement for a rising co-op apartment house at 160 East 72nd. It was to have two apartments on each of the four lower floors, full-floor apartments of 11 rooms on the 5th through 10th floors, and a 17-room apartment on the 11th and 12th floors. ...The Goulds' architect, Taylor & Levi, gave them a Romanesque facade with irregular, red-brown brick, orangey trim and leaded glass windows, characteristic of the period's stylistic flirtation with antiquity but not obviously de luxe." (Christopher Gray, "A Historical Sleeper, on So Many Levels", The New York Times, "Streetscapes" column, February 17, 2011,

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/20/realestate/20streetscapes.html?ref=streetscapes&_r=0)

The Upper East Side Historic District Extension Designation Report describes this "14-story Italian Romanesque Revival style apartment building [as having] one visible primary facade, one visible side elevation, and one partially-visible rear facade. [The] East 72nd Street Facade [is of t]ripartite composition consisting of a two-story base clad in interlocking patterns of brown brick and random ashlar stone, a ten-story brown brick shaft, and a two-story brown brick capital; [this]...elevation is divided vertically into three bays; [the] ground floor bays each contain two arched openings, creating a regular arcade of six openings; each opening has a corbelled brick and radiating stone lintel; the two left-most ground floor openings lead to a recessed entrance vestibule;



...the remaining ground floor openings contain pairs of smaller round-arched openings, with the arches supported on marble piers and with ashlar-laid stone spandrels decorated with circular terra-cotta medallions; ...the 13th and 14th stories feature very large, doubleheight, round-arched studio window openings with corbelled brick lintels and terra-cotta keystones in all three bays; ...the spandrels above the three round arches each contain two terra-cotta medallions... ." (NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, March 23, 2010, prepared by Christopher D. Brazee and Jennifer L. Most, pp. 40-42)

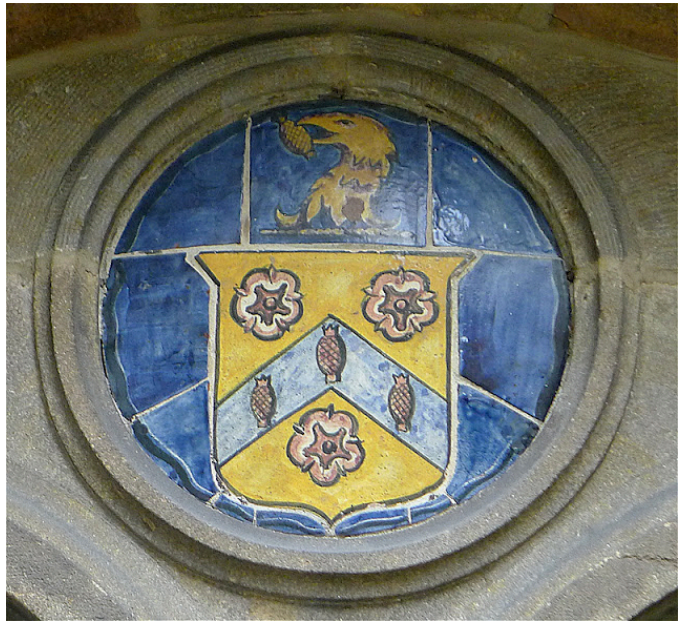


The ceramic ornamentation in the archways of the facade was made by the artist/ceramicist Henry Varnum Poor who felt 'that since architecture itself is a more or less abstract art, the warmth of some imagery is needed in our buildings.' "...I am one of those old-timers who feels that there is a fundamental urge in human beings to make images, and that art is imagery, while abstract art is just decoration. ...Because modern buildings lack rich materials that have human association, it is very necessary to have art in modern buildings. A beautiful masonry wall does not need decoration, it is already related to human life, but we still need imagery." (Eleanor Bittermann, **Art in Modern Architecture**, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York, 1952, p. 146)

Although there is no specific reference to Poor working on the East 72nd Street building facade in the "HVP Annotated Chronology", there are parts of the Chronology which just say that Poor worked on unnamed ceramic projects. [And he did sign one of the pieces.]

(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201920%20to%201939.pdf>)

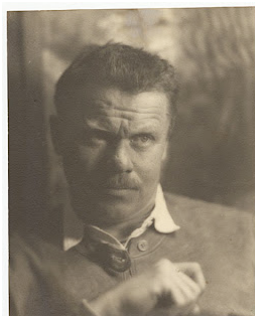






The artist's signature can be seen on the lower right tile in this panel.

“Henry Varnum Poor was born in Chapman, Kansas in 1888*. As a boy, Poor showed an aptitude for drawing and strong interest in nature. He received his B.A. in art from Stanford University before going to Europe in 1910. Particularly significant for his development as an artist was his stay in London, where he worked under Walter Sickert and visited the Grafton Gallery exhibition “Manet and the Post-Impressionists.” French modernism had such an impact on Poor that he moved to Paris, studying at the Académie Julian for five months. After he returned to the United States he worked in various modes. Although Poor considered painting his primary medium, after the stock market crash in 1929 he focused mainly on ceramics, which brought him fame and numerous awards. He also worked successfully as an architect, designer, furniture maker, sculptor, muralist, author, illustrator, and educator. Self-taught in many of these disciplines, Poor created art that was close to nature, instinctive, vigorous, and well-crafted. He was a founder of the American Designers Gallery in New York and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.” (http://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/bios/poor-bio.htm)



Henry Varnum Poor, ca. 1930 / unidentified photographer. Forbes Watson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Digital ID: 2324.

*[Many sources, and even the artist himself, chronicled the date as 1888; however, census records and the Chapman newspaper confirm 1887.] (<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/folder.pdf>)



Henry Varnum Poor and daughter, Anne, working on a mural, c. 1930s. (Henry Varnum Poor, ca. 1930 / unidentified photographer. Forbes Watson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Digital ID 2835. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/henry-varnum-poor-2835>)

Poor built his own home in upstate New York during the 1920s and early 1930s. "In creating [...his house], Poor came to realize the value of the handmade and the experience led to experimentation in other areas. It was here that he taught himself to make his famous pottery, planned his murals and constructed furniture." (<http://www.craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/crow-house-rising>)

Poor's "...first recognition in the East was as a ceramicist. He produced hand-thrown usable pottery, plates, bowls, cups, saucers, vases, with his unique pictorial decoration on each piece. He was shown in the Montross Gallery, and although the demand for the work exceeded his ability to meet it, he refused any assistants. Each piece was his own." (<http://henryvarnumpoor.com/bio.html>) In his introduction to the exhibit catalog, "Poor elaborated on his move from painting to pottery: '...I believe that the natural development of modern art lies in a closer application of things more related to everyday usage. In this direction the artist escapes the devitalizing isolation of the studio and finds in the appropriate materials those inherent limitations and demands which give a sense

of necessity and fitness to the completed form. Making clay into decorated pottery completes a cycle, a beginning and end, form and enrichment controlled by the artist. The method of the pottery shown in this exhibition, known as Under-glaze Decoration, is very simple. It allows the same subordination of technique that is shown in modern painting, and for the same reason; to keep clear the essential point of view which is judgment of relations in color and form."

(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201920%20to%201939.pdf>, p. 4)

"In 1925 he married again. He had first married Josephine Wiltz, with whom he had a daughter, Josephine, and then the textile designer, Marion Dorn. His third wife, who was with him until his death, was Bessie Breuer, a distinguished journalist, editor, and novelist.

"Poor began to do true fresco murals, painted on wet plaster which became a permanent part of the wall. He did frescos in the Department of Justice and the Interior Department in Washington, and was appointed by President Roosevelt to be the artist-member of the Commission on Fine Arts. He did a large fresco for the Louisville Courier-Journal, and most extensively, a major work in Old Main at Penn State. He continued working in ceramics, doing ceramic murals in Fresno, Chicago, New York, and Boston.

"As well as his own house, Poor was the architect of impressive modern homes for notable friends, including John Houseman, Burgess Meredith, Maxwell Anderson, and Milton Caniff. Poor never stopped his work in ceramics, and, like his paintings, many examples are in museums, from the Metropolitan in New York to the Houston Art Museum . His book on ceramics, 'A Book of Pottery - From Mud to Immortality' is close to required reading as an explanation of techniques and expression of his philosophy of art." (<http://henryvarnumpoor.com/bio.html>)

Burgess Meredith also asked Poor to design his [nearby] house... . In addition to the main house Poor created a series of tile murals for the terrace and pool pavilion areas. "There is a harmonious quality in the classically severe lines of the rough textured pavilion and terrace wall which are decorated with subtly glazed ceramic reliefs and murals.

"[...Henry Varnum Poor discussed his work on the Meredith tile murals:] 'I have done a lot of mural jobs that would be too large to do in tiles because tiles are harder to set in place than fresco and it is more difficult to make other things go with them, they are more assertive than fresco. However, the ceramic tile mural is much more closely related to painting than to mere surface pattern.

'For the pavilion relief plaques I used very subdued colors: kind of an oyster white; yellow, quite a lot in the fish; and a variety of colors in the background--the yellow is the strongest color. Since these are primarily sculpture, I felt that high colors would detract from the form. The far wall with ceramic tile murals was designed as a background for the charcoal grill and a decorated bench opposite the grill compliments the wall murals. ...The sculptures on the pool pavilion are under a wide overhang, more or less sheltered, and high firing was not necessary. On the other hand, the mural tiles used on the further wall had to be highly fired because they are completely exposed to the weather. The sculptured tiles in the pavilion wall are set flush in recesses left in the brickwork. The brick was later whitewashed... . Most of the panels have fish and insect subjects but there are also a couple of tiles of nude bathing women. All of the panels are done in

quite sharp, heavy relief.'" (Eleanor Bittermann, *Art in Modern Architecture*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York, 1952, p. 146)

According to Peter Poor, the son of Henry Varnum Poor, the tiles installed at the Meredith House have been removed for their protection after some vandalism. The photos below were taken during the removal of the tiles and are used with the permission of Peter Poor.





Besides the building at 160 East 72nd Street, Henry Varnum Poor worked on tile installations on other Manhattan buildings. One was the facade of the Weyhe Bookstore and Gallery at 794 Lexington Avenue. In 1991 Christopher Gray wrote about this building in a "Streetscapes" column in The New York Times, "The Weyhe Book Store and Gallery - From Books to Baked Goods". Mr Gray writes, "Erhard Weyhe emigrated from England on the eve of World War I and soon specialized in the sale of art books[,...] and in 1923 he bought a four-story, 1870's brownstone at 794 Lexington. His architect, Henry S. Churchill, shaved off most of the brownstone decoration and added what makes the building arresting. The upper three floors were reduced to an abstract blocky design of brown and red tinted stucco and show windows were opened up on the first and second floors, with deep blue tile surrounds above and a yellow and blue tile checkerboard below. Above the door and first-floor windows are three floral tile medallions in red, tan, blue and yellow. [In 1923 e]ither Churchill or Weyhe got Henry Varnum Poor, a painter-ceramicist-sculptor-architect, to design a four-part floral tile plaque rich in blue, green, orange and purple. Poor's signature is still visible under the cracked glaze."

<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/29/realestate/streetscapes-the-veyhe-...s.html?n=Top%2fClassifieds%2fReal%20Estate%2fColumns%2fStreetscapes>



"Façade de la librairie Weyhe, à New-York, 1929", Image ID: 1555771, http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1030408&imageID=1555771&word=Weyhe&s=1¬word=&d=&c=&f=1,2,3,4,5,9,15,19,20&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&total=4&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=1#_seemore

Poor commented on the stability of the facade ceramics, "If tiles are thoroughly burned, they stand up all right outdoors, although it does not hurt to shelter them. Some tiles I did on the front of Weyhe's bookstore in New York get no shelter at all, but they have stood up." (Eleanor Bittermann, *Art in Modern Architecture*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York, 1952, p. 146)

The tiles may have stood up well to the elements, but in 1991 "the gallery and book store moved out. The family still owns the building and has leased the space to the Glendale bakery, a franchise. Phil Rudnick, a spokesman for Glendale, said last week that construction would start soon on a 'very modern, really upscale' bakery/deli. Mrs. Dennis [Weyhe's daughter] says that the family did not require or even suggest the facade be saved."

(<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/29/realestate/streetscapes-the-weyhe-...s.html?n=Top%2fClassifieds%2fReal%20Estate%2fColumns%2fStreetscapes>)

Peter Poor has said that the floral tile panels "were not set into the wall, but on a base that projected several inches from it [...and looked damaged]." (Email from Peter Poor to Michael Padwee dated 11-29-12) Below is the facade today sans tile ornament.

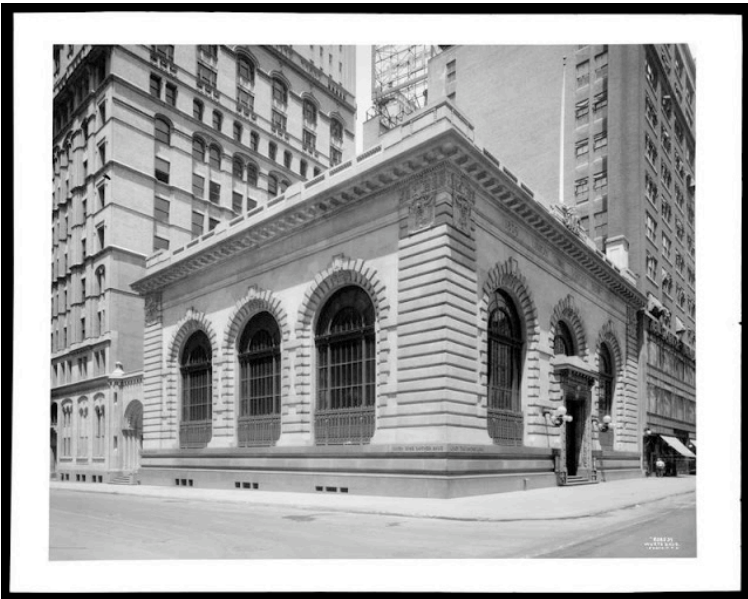


794 Lexington Avenue, November 2012. Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee.

Another building that Poor was commissioned to work on was the Union Dime Savings Bank on 40th Street and Sixth Avenue, across from Bryant Park. The building was built in 1927, and The New York Times wrote about Poor's part in the interior decoration. Poor "...has been both painter and potter, excelling in design in both fields... . His latest work is the design and execution of tiles for the domed ceiling of the new Byzantine room in the Union Dime Savings Bank... . The fact that the room is 'Byzantine' disturbed him a little, as he was not quite sure that his native designs, untinged with archaeological suggestion, would fit in with the surrounding decoration. He tried to tie his work to its surroundings by the geometrical shapes of the plaques enclosing his central motifs and by the formal stars, circles and so forth connecting them... . His dogs, cats, flowers, babies, all favorites of his pottery, were given the freedom of the ceiling, and to his mild surprise the result bore a satisfactory resemblance to Byzantine, or at least was in accord with the leading features of the room." ("Henry Varnum Poor's Work on Ceiling of a New York's Bank's 'Byzantine' Room", *The New York Times*, September 4, 1927)

This commission consisted "...primarily of three bold tile configurations, each containing up to thirty individual tiles." (Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, p. 43)

The bank and Poor's tile work as seen in 1928:



(Wurts Bros. (New York, N.Y.) 40th Street at the N.W. corner of 6th Avenue. Union Dime Savings Bank, general view)



Wurts Bros. (New York, N.Y.) Union Dime Savings Bank, general interior of new part.



Wurts Bros. (New York, N.Y.) 40th Street and 6th Avenue. Union Dime Savings Bank, interior of officers' section. These three photos are from the Museum of the City of New York Collections.

Poor commented on his aesthetic philosophy: "...Though I wanted to make a living as an artist, and focused considerable time on my ceramic works, my aesthetic goals always superseded the financial. ...Loving drawing and painting, I follow wholeheartedly the technique which I felt demanded least technical and scientific knowledge and gave most freedom and richness to drawing and color. From the beginning I had an obsession against letting technique be the controlling factor. I even exhibited and sold cracked and imperfect pieces if I felt the decoration was fine enough, as you would mount a drawing, if you like it, even though the paper was torn and soiled...my sole criterion is still the life of each piece, and its beauty of form and decoration, not its technical perfection.'" (<http://www.georgethomasclark.com/?p=789>)

An article in **Time** magazine in 1929, "Potter Poor", also discussed Poor's ceramic work: "Potter Poor's method is Persian and difficult. Known today as "under-glaze decoration," his method involves metallic oxide colors which must fuse with a glaze fully to reveal their tones. Most pottery methods involve repeated firings, which allow plenty of time for the potter to decorate and redecorate if he is not satisfied. Not so with the oldtime Persians, and Potter Poor. He must do his decorating swiftly and surely, and only once, for the glaze must quickly follow and the piece be fired without delay. "Potter Poor justifies his exacting process by showing that it necessitates brisk, simple design – 'the subordination of technique' – and produces 'depth of brilliance of color.'" (<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201920%20to%201939.pdf>, p. 7)



Hotel Shelton picture post card courtesy of [Cardcow.com](http://www.cardcow.com).

"In 1928 Poor created a ceramic tile mural, Sports..., for the [Athletic Club in the] famed New York skyscraper, the Hotel Shelton. This was composed of at least forty-eight tiles. Images of athletes (with aviator Charles Lindbergh at the center) alternated with geometric pinwheel motifs. (The mural was destroyed during a renovation of the hotel in the 1960s.)" (Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, pp. 43-44) "The hotel, located at Lexington Avenue and 49th Street, was designed by architect Arthur Loomis Harmon, and construction was completed in 1924. It is now the New York Marriott East Side."

(<http://www.flickr.com/photos/26746018@N03/3234869700>)

"Poor received a number of commissions for tilework and furniture in 1929 as a result of contacts made through the American Designers' Gallery. ...Financier Edgar A. Levy commissioned an eight-tile mural, Tennis Players and Bathers..., originally installed on the grounds of Levy's home in Westchester County. Novelist Theodore Dreiser ordered a set of four floor-to-ceiling lamps for his home, 'Iroki,' in Mount Kisco, New York. Philip Goodwin, coarchitect of the original Museum of Modern Art building..., requested a pair of tile murals for the wall of a pool shelter...in Syosset, Long Island." (Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, p. 47)

In 1932 Poor was one of twenty artists commissioned to help with the interior decoration of Radio City Music Hall. Poor's part was to design "four molded ceramic lamp bases, along with an undetermined number of vases, all for public lounges. Evidently, the four table lamps were stolen

within a week of the gala opening of the theatre, and the vases have disappeared as well." (**Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970**, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, p. 51)

Poor created at least two ceramic fountains that are documented: [...the first] tile and ceramic fountain, which depicts Leda and the swan from Greek mythology, came from Helen Hayes' house in Rockland County, New York and is now in storage at Penn State University (2010).



Helen Hayes in 1963 with the fountain made by Henry Varnum Poor. From the Henry Varnum Poor Archives at the Birger Sandzen Memorial Gallery in Lindborg, KS.

"Although technically high relief rather than freestanding, the wall fountain Leda and the Swan..., produced about 1936 for Helen Hayes [and Charles MacArthur], is undoubtedly Poor's most elaborate sculpture. A smaller fountain, Nude with Alligator..., is from the same period, but cast from a mold made about 1925 for a fountain for writer Ben Hecht." (*Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970*, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, p. 49)



(Creative Commons license photo taken by Greg Grieco for Penn State University)

"Museum officials hope that the fountain may one day be placed inside a building at the proposed Arboretum." (<http://live.psu.edu/image/4949972826>)

In 1934 "Poor [became] involved in the development, along with George Biddle, Ed Bruce, Forbes Watson, Ed Rowan, and other leading artists and supporters, of the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (Fine Arts). Biddle encouraged his former classmate at Groton School, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to endorse the formation of the organization, which was intended to provide employment for struggling artists.

(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201920%20to%201939.pdf>, pp. 11-12)



Photo from the Digital Projects at SDSU Library, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/38912020@N08/>.

Poor obtained some commissions through this WPA project--murals in the Fresno, California and Chicago, Illinois Post Offices. The Downtown Station of the Fresno Post Office at 2309 Tulare Street featured "...a tile mural titled 'Grape Picking' by Henry Varnum Poor, likely a reference to Fresno's raisin industry." (<http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/projects/downtown-fresno-post-office-fresno-ca/>)

In 1942 Poor created ceramic murals for the Uptown Station (4850 N. Broadway) of the United States Post Office in Chicago. "...the actual tiles were fired by the Federal Seaboard Corp. in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Because of delays in their production, Poor was unable to install them until the spring or late fall of 1943."

(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201940%20to%201959.pdf>, p. 4)



The Carl Sandburg mural with Woody Guthrie(?). Chicago mural photos courtesy of [Irina Hynes](#).



Louis Sullivan mural.

Poor's Chicago murals honored Carl Sandburg and Louis Sullivan: "...painter and ceramist Henry Varnum Poor...was hired to create a work of art that would celebrate the people and history of Chicago. ...Poor chose as his subject matter Uptown-area resident and poet Carl Sandburg and architect Louis Sullivan, who designed such Chicago classics as the Carson Pirie Scott building. The mural is made of ceramic tile." (<http://www.compassrose.org/uptown/Uptown-Post-Office.html>)

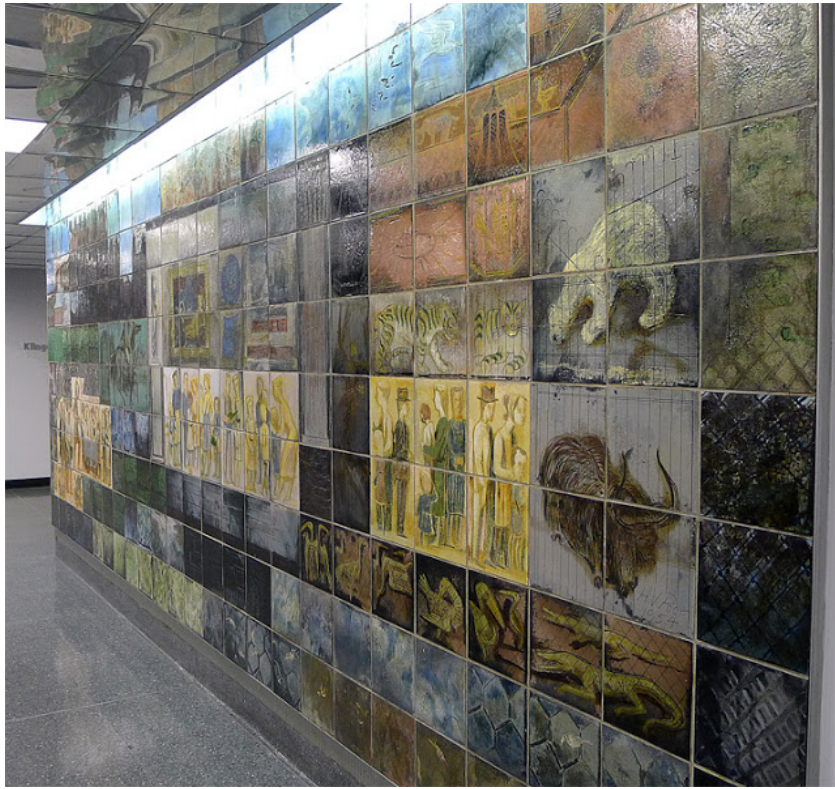
In Fall 1953 HVP was "informed that he had been the unanimous choice [...to create] a memorial to Maurice Wertheim" at the Klingenstein Pavilion for maternity cases at Mt. Sinai Hospital. The mural was to be eight feet high by twenty feet long. Poor's method, here, was to first make sketches "...scaled to a nine-inch-square tile unit, in a module system... . Next...a sketch...in pastel on tracing paper, of the motifs arranged according to the eventual dominant color. The third step...consisted of 250 master sketches, one for each tile, in the size of the tile." Poor had the "'plain black vit' tiles manufactured in Perth Amboy... ." Then he decorated and fired them in his studio in his wood-heated kiln. (Monroe Stearns, **Henry Varnum Poor**, manuscript for a biography, 1976, pp. 350-353. Monroe Stearns research papers on Henry Varnum Poor, 1938 – 1975, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.)

"The mural...was dedicated on December 7, 1954 and depicted scenes from the local zoo, boat-house and the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201940%20to%201959.pdf>, p. 10) "Mt. Sinai Hospital... faces Central Park... . The unobstructed view of that rus in urbe expanse from the hospital's upper windows had suggested to Henry a panorama of the park as through a reducing glass. This he rendered in panels of varying dimensions, each a synthesis of one of the park's principal attractions--the sculptural monuments, the boating lakes, the bridal path, the Zoo, the Metropolitan Museum, and, of course, the multitudinous variety of visitors of all ages." (Stearns, p. 353)

"My single intention,' Henry himself wrote, 'was to present something pleasant and intriguing to the eyes of those parents and children waiting for the new addition to the family.'" (Stearns, p. 355)

This was one of five tile mural commissions Poor received in the 1950s. "These works all employ episodic or composite imagery rather than full-scale, monumental forms." (**Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970**, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, pp. 53-55)



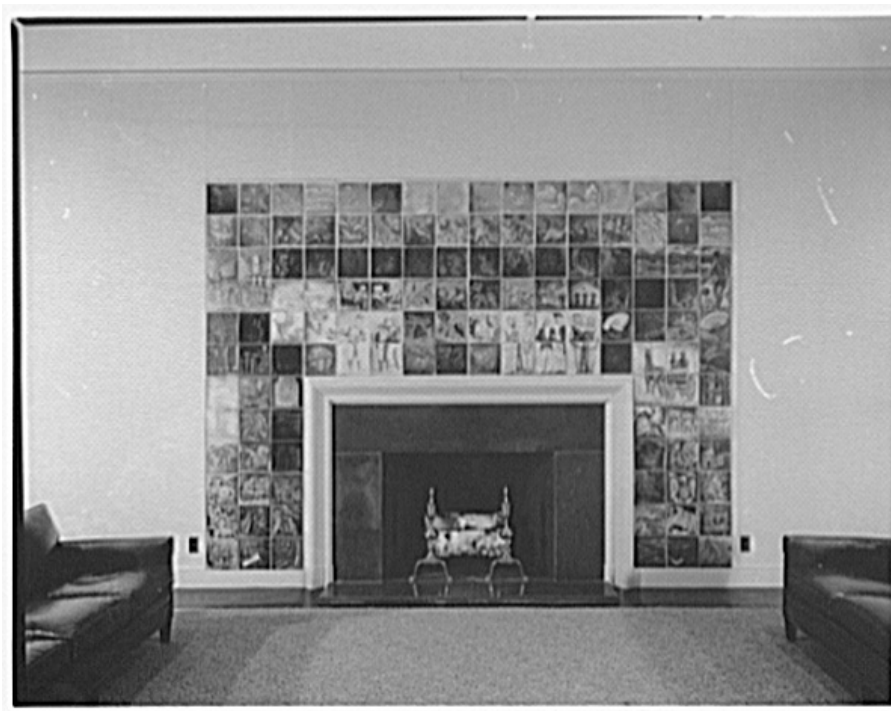
Photos courtesy of Michael Padwee. I had to take these from odd angles so that no one in the hospital waiting room was photographed. The top line of tiles was obscured by the lighting.





"[These commissions for tile murals in the 1950s also...] included Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Massachusetts; Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, New York; and Edward Bleeker Junior High School in Flushing, New York [147-26 25th Drive]."

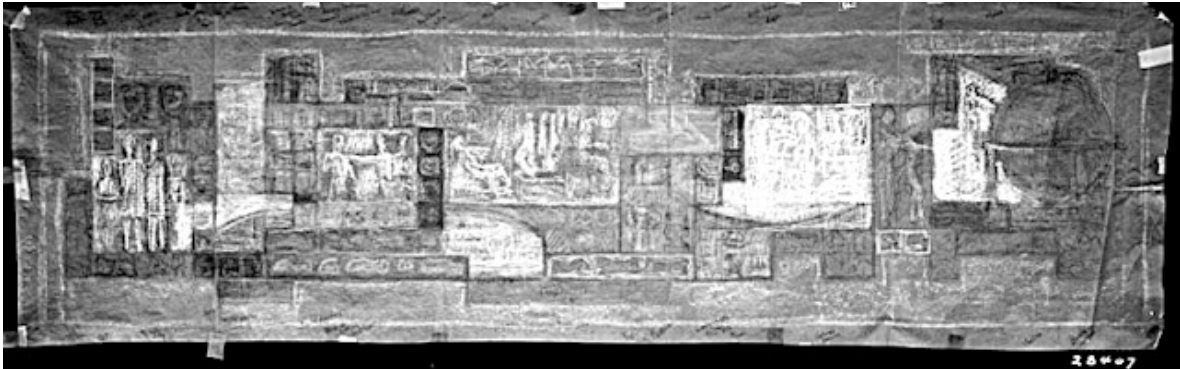
(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201940%20to%201959.pdf>, pp. 10-11)



Title: Deerfield School, Hilson Art Gallery, Deerfield, Massachusetts. Fireplace detail. **Creator:** Gottscho-Schleisner, Inc., photographer. **Date Created/Published:** 1956 Feb. 10. **Call Number:** LC-G613- 68685 <P&P> [P&P]. **Repository:** Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. No known restrictions on publication.

(<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/gsc1994005972/PP/>)

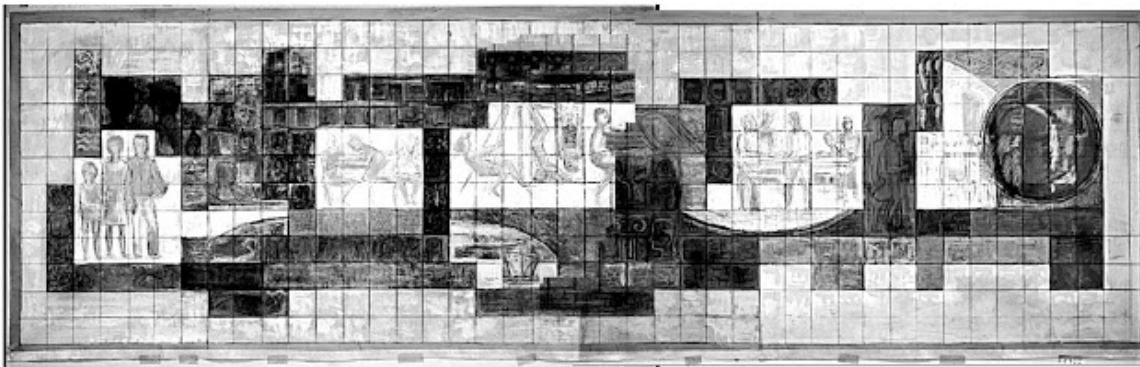
In 1955 "Poor created an elaborate three-part mural for the Hilson Memorial Gallery of Deerfield Academy, Massachusetts. Two panels (each two by five feet) flank the front entrance of the gallery [not shown]; one illustrates the sciences and mathematics, and the other the humanities. The major tile section, Scenes of Academy Life (nine by twelve feet...) frames an interior fireplace." (Henry Varnum Poor, 1887 1970, Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA, 1983, pp. 53-55)
(I have tried to contact the Deerfield Academy and the Hilson Gallery for further information about this mural, but I have not received any response.)



Sketches made by Henry Varnum Poor in September 1955 for tile murals in JHS 185, Queens.

(Photos courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archives,

<http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/view/search/who/Poor,%20Ceramic%20artist/what/School%20decoration?q=JHS%20185,%20Queens>)



A combination of two sketches.



The mural, behind an iron fence, on two walls at right angles to each other.

The mural made for 25Q185 (the NYC Board of Education's designation for JHS 185 in Queens) is installed near the entrance to the school on the facade, inside a fence. As a result of the Central Park mural at Mt. Sinai Hospital, an architect who designed this school, Ralph Pomerance, invited Poor to make a mural for Edward Bleeker Junior High School.



Because of the severely rectilinear pattern of the building Henry broke both the top and bottom boundary lines of his design, so that the mural itself, surrounded by the yellow brick of the wall, varied in height from ten to seven nine-inch-square tiles. Within this jagged frame he planned scene-panels with irregular outlines... . The total effect provides the only visual interest in a monotonous piece of construction.” (Stearns, pp. 358-359)





One tile in this mural has already been damaged by someone who cut a name into it.



"Abraham Lincoln High School [2800 Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn] was built in 1929. ...Abraham Lincoln High School, Bayside High School, Samuel J. Tilden High School, John Adams High School, and Grover Cleveland High School were all built during the Great Depression from one set of blueprints, in order to save money."

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln_High_School_\(Brooklyn\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln_High_School_(Brooklyn)))



(Courtesy of the New York Municipal Archives. Photo of Abraham Lincoln High School taken c. 1980-1988)

Poor's murals are still in place on either side of the auditorium stage. Retired Abraham Lincoln High School mathematics teacher Mark Grashow helped me gain access to the school and murals. Mark said that he had noticed the murals during the thirty-five years he spent at Lincoln as a teacher, but he didn't really know anything about them, a lack of knowledge of the school system's artwork that is probably widespread. (In retirement Mark is the co-founder of [US-Africa Children's Fellowship](#), which has shipped more than 18 40-foot containers of school supplies to 70,000 children in 165 schools in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Ghana.)



“The Central Park mural [also]...impressed Dr. Gabriel Mason, Principal of Abraham Lincoln High School, whose vast neo-classical building with Art Deco motifs architect Walter C. Martin brought to completion in 1929... . Dr. Mason [...was] determined ...to have the school’s auditorium decorated after the removal of its pipe organ[,] to make room for electronic sound equipment[,] left unsightly gaps at either side of the stage. He invited Henry to consider the project. [...Since] the twenty by twelve-foot gaps had to remain more or less open in order for sound to be projected from the new equipment...[,] Henry... proposed covering the holes with wire mesh on which he could place ‘cut out’ heroic-sized figures composed of ceramic tiles joined and braced by metal strips. They would, he explained, resemble stained glass windows.”

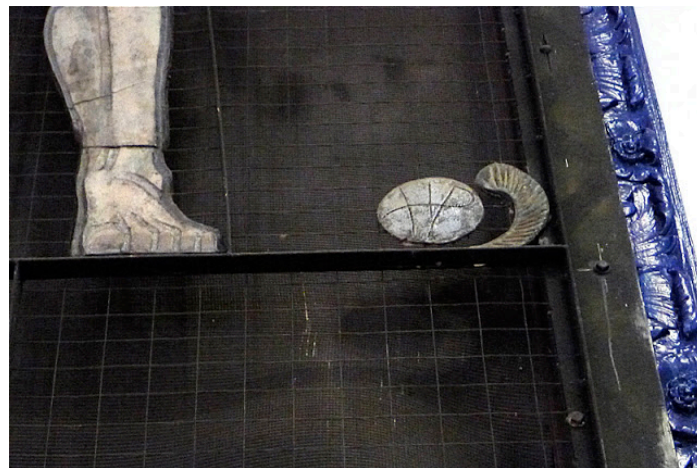
(Stearns, pp. 357-358)





“On the left of the stage is the god Mercury in Roman Armor... . In his right hand, however, he holds thunderbolts; Henry, with the new sound equipment in mind, decided to extend the god’s protectorates to electricity.” (Stearns, p. 358)





Henry Varnum Poor's "signature" on the right mural.

“Opposite is laurel-crowned Apollo, holding aloft a lyre, his free arm...raised like that of Carl Sandburg in Henry’s Chicago mural. ...Both figures are stylized, their colors unrealistic browns, ochres, green-blues--a considerable departure in design and tone from Henry’s realistic murals.” (Stearns, p. 358)

In 1958 Poor was "...commissioned by [his friend,] Mary Meigs[,] to create a ceramic tile memorial to her mother, Margaret Wister Meigs on the grounds of Fort Hunter Mansion and Park [5300 North Front Street] in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania."

(<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/HVP%20Annotated%20Chronology%201940%20to%201959.pdf>, p. 12)





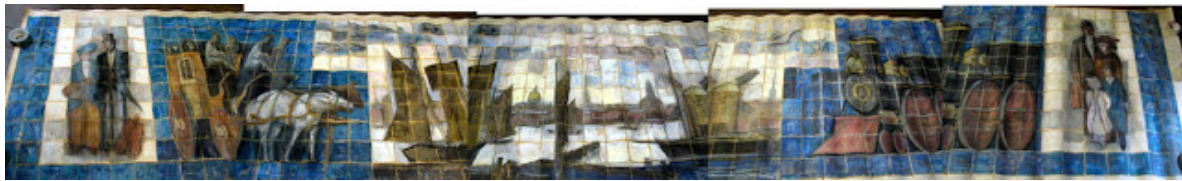
(Photos courtesy of Carl Dickson, Director, Dauphin County Parks and Recreation)

"The memorial to Margaret Wister Meigs was commissioned by her children after her death. This commission was undoubtedly spearheaded by Mrs. Meigs' daughter, Mary Meigs. Mary was, among many things, a writer, an artist, and later an advocate for gay rights and the elderly. ...Mary was in an artist's colony in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, at one time and, I assume, became friends with the Poor's during that period of her life. The tiles are said to represent Margaret Wister Meigs 'Tree of Life.' Two birds crowing are supposed to represent her two sons Arthur and J. Wister and various pairs of fruit represent her twin daughters, Sarah and Mary, now sadly all deceased. The tiles are housed in a niche of a small structure that is made of bricks salvaged from Margaret's then-recently demolished town home on M Street in Washington , DC... ." (Email

from Carl A. Dickson to Michael Padwee dated 20 November 2012, titled "RE: Request for information re. Margaret Wister Meigs Memorial")

Monroe Stearns had a slightly different explanation of the mural's meaning. "The Meigs Memorial consists of only twelve nine-inch-square tiles, plus undecorated ones of gray-blue that cover the arch above the principal panel. The composition, which Mary Meigs wanted to express her mother's interest in the farm life around Fort Hunter, is a tree bearing several kinds of fruit, and sheltering animals and birds." "...Henry himself installed [the tiles] with the help of Bill Pica, [his...] handyman..." (Stearns, pp. 360-361)

Whatever the explanation, this small memorial has a very complex character, according to Peter Poor, the artist's son.



A stitched-together photo of five "cartoons" drawn by Henry Varnum Poor that illustrate the completed Travelers Insurance Company mural in Boston. (There are some missing parts due to a lack of overlap in the photos. Thus, this is not a complete rendering of the Travelers mural.) The drawings and original photos are the property of the artist's son, Peter Poor, and are used with his permission.

The last of HVP's architectural murals "...was commissioned in 1959 by Kahn and Jacobs for the Travelers Insurance Co. building at 125 High Street, Boston. Located at the Pearl Street entrance, it is outdoors... ..being 7 ½ x 29 feet in size, it is not easily visible...from any angle. ...it stands free of the building, [...and it is] not a mural in the strict sense of that word, rather a decoration to screen the entrance [of the building] from the heavy commercial traffic around Boston's South Station. The 520 tiles of irregular surface texture, which Henry installed with Bill Pica's help, depict in five panels the means and methods of travel throughout the years of the Company's existence." (Stearns, p. 361) Sadly, this building was demolished in 1988, and I do not know what happened to HVP's mural, nor have I been able to locate any pictorial record of it.

"The last years of his life were spent primarily working in ceramics and pastels. [Poor] died from a heart attack on December 8, 1970." (<http://www.sandzen.org/poor%20images/folder.pdf>)

(At some time in the future I hope to write about the architecture of Henry Varnum Poor and his interior ceramic designs. I would like to thank HVP's son, Peter Poor; Ron Michael, Curator, Birger Sandzen Memorial Gallery, Lindsborg, KS; Joe Taylor, Sheila Menzies and Brechelle Ware of the Tile Heritage Foundation; Carl A. Dickson, Director, Dauphin County (PA) Parks and Recreation; Mark Grashow of U.S.-Africa Children's Fellowship; Sharon Gluck; Robert D. Ellis; and Irina Hynes for their help with this article.)