

## **PUBLIC ART PROGRAMS IN NEW YORK CITY: THE CETA TILE MURALS AT CLARK STREET**

**Michael Padwee**

For many decades the New York City subway system was an artistic wasteland. After the first initial decades of subway construction, the integration of art and subway station design almost ceased due to the economy, war and disinterest, among other reasons. Then for a few years in the 1970s/80s the CETA program allowed artists to create public works of art throughout the country as well as in New York City. Art works such as the tile murals in the Clark Street IRT subway arcade helped spur the reintegration of art and local transportation that occurred in the subway system in the decades leading up to the present. The Clark Street murals helped subway riders to recognize what their community was, and what it offered.

New York City has sponsored a number of community-based art programs since the 1970s. Some were specifically designed to create jobs for struggling artists in times of economic adversity. Others were attempts to engage communities or segments of communities in artistic endeavors. These first became codified in 1976 when, under "Mayor Abraham D. Beame, Cultural Affairs [became] a separate agency and Claude Shostal [became] the City's first Commissioner of Cultural Affairs. The 15 cultural institutions housed in City-owned buildings or on City-owned property that had been receiving their City support from the Bureau of the Budget, [...were] added to the new agency's budget. [...Then in 1977 the new Mayor,] Edward I. Koch appoint[ed] Henry Geldzahler Commissioner of Cultural Affairs...[, and Cultural Affairs began to administer] the federally funded Comprehensive Employment and Training Act Artists Project (CETA), the largest government-funded artist employment project since the WPA of the 1930's, hiring more than 600 artists to provide cultural services throughout the City, as well as 300 CETA employees in maintenance, guard and other positions at cultural institutions. This program [continued] through 1980." ([http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/about/history\\_65-80.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/about/history_65-80.shtml))

CETA "...was to train those who were unemployed or low-income workers and issue them jobs in the public service, with the hope that they could then swim into the economy at large. The CETA Artists' Project under the Cultural Council Foundation employed artists in the city of New York, introducing their efforts and talent into New York communities.

"The idea was simple enough: administrators would locate jobs/residencies for the artists -- visual artists, painters, poets and writers, dancers, musicians. The artists would then meet with the community groups to work out a compatible job description -- the local organizations had no outlay, but the idea was to show that artists do have value within these organizations."

([http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the\\_best\\_american\\_poetry/2011/03/this-just-in-calling-all-former-ceta-artists-tell-your-story.html](http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2011/03/this-just-in-calling-all-former-ceta-artists-tell-your-story.html))



Johan Sellenraad's mural (above) and Alan Samalin's mural in situ, midafternoon on a weekday, 2013. (Photos courtesy of Michael Padwee)



## New York City's CETA Tile Murals

There were many types of art projects completed through the CETA program including ceramic-glazed murals on tiles. Two of these murals are in the ground-level arcade of the Clark Street IRT subway station in Brooklyn Heights.

Three artists--two painters and a ceramist--were hired by CETA after a citywide competition to produce a mural: the "1980 adopt-a-station project sponsored by the MTA and the Municipal Art Society brought two colorful ceramic tile murals to the arcade walls [of the IRT's Clark Street subway station]. Alan Samalin painted a picture of the Heights Promenade showing the ethnic diversity of its visitors. Johan Sellenraad depicted the 1849 Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims. Joe Stallone was ceramist for both mosaics." (Don Evans, "Heights Group Seeks To Revitalize Deteriorating Subway Arcade", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 4, 2006; [http://50.56.218.160/archive/category.php?category\\_id=27&id=7471](http://50.56.218.160/archive/category.php?category_id=27&id=7471)) Rochelle Slovin, who would later found and direct the Museum of the Moving Image, was the Administrator for this project and for the CETA Artists' Program in New York City.



This mural includes portraits of the artist, Alan Samalin, his wife, ceramic artist Joan Shulman, their child and the ceramic artist, Joseph Stallone. There are missing and damaged tiles on the bottom of the mural. (Photo taken in 2012 in the Clark Street subway station by Michael Padwee.)

Johan Sellenraad recently wrote about the mural project: "In the 70s/80s the subway stations were in bad shape and there certainly was no art in the subway program. In the CETA funded program we had some individual freedom of how we saw our roles as

artists in society. ...Already money and the galleries instead of artists were beginning to dominate the art scene in NYC. So we were looking for alternatives. I had organized big shows in Federal Buildings downtown prior to CETA. But what could be more challenging than the subways as an environment to have art? When managers of the CETA art project contacted the MTA, I jumped at the chance. At that point the best the MTA could do [...was] give us two neutral rectangles, roughly the size of paintings. ...I received around 5' x 8' and Alan Samalin perhaps 8' x 10', spaces in a boring design. Joe Stallone was assigned to work with both of us. I think we worked in Joe's studio because of the kilns. We used standard ceramic colors and after lots of tests, set up full size set-ups where the tile cuts were designed in relationship to the over all design[,] and where we could paint on the bisque fired hand made tiles as if they were a painting surface. They were then fired with a [commercial underglaze color, and sealed with a low-fire,] clear glaze. ...When finished they were boxed and labeled and transferred to the site for installation. We had control over most of it." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 13 Feb. 2013)

Alan Samalin "...studied painting at The Cooper Union in N.Y.C., where a mixture of Bauhaus classicism and New York School Abstract-Expressionist romanticism was blended with the avant-garde flavors of the day, creating a powerful brew. He has created murals for non-profit community organizations, government agencies, and private corporations." (<http://www.alansamalin.com/pages/Bio.html>)



The Plymouth Church mural in the Clark Street subway arcade in Brooklyn by Johan Sellenraad. A few tiles near the ground are missing, one in the grass in the hedges is broken, and one or two are cracked. (Photo taken in 2013 by Michael Padwee)



Sellenraad pictured himself in the top of two windows to the right of the grassy area.

Johan Sellenraad graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago and taught art and art history for forty-eight years. His "...paintings have shown in major museum and gallery exhibitions in this country and abroad, including a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York. He has done large public art commissions in Arizona [in Phoenix at the Royal Palm School, <https://publicartssearch.phoenix.gov/Details.aspx?pid=65>], Michigan and New York and his work is in numerous collections.



Detail of the “Brooklyn Bridge” painting installation. (Photo courtesy of Johan Sellenraad)

“Johan's monumental 85-foot-long painting 'Brooklyn Bridge' and his work as a founding member of NYC's Art in the Subways program are clear examples of how the artist's immediate surroundings define his work. [Sellenraad added,] 'Painting for me is more about the process, about making something come alive, about its ability to thrill, astonish or create joy.’” (<http://www.thehansongallery.com/johan-sellenraad.php>)



CETA Mural acknowledgements.

In 1986 Sellenraad painted a ceramic mural in Flint, Michigan, which he considered "a major public art piece...for the city and the UAW, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 'Sit-Down Strike' that unionized the auto workers. [...The memorial] included four handmade ceramic tile murals produced at Pewabic Pottery\* in Detroit, set in a concrete structure based on the auto factories. It was an outside location and unfortunately the concrete let in water behind the tiles forcing the glaze to disintegrate. A major loss."  
(Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 13 Feb. 2013)



Johan Sellenraad's Sit-Down Strike Memorial Murals, Flint, MI. (Photo courtesy of Pewabic Pottery)

\*[Sandy Koukoulas, Public Relations representative of the Pewabic Pottery and Hanne Fuglsang Nielsen, Pewabic archivist, said their records indicate that Sellenraad painted 12" x 12" tiles made by ceramic artist J.T. Abernathy in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and then brought the tiles to Pewabic to be clear-coated and fired. The tiles were not produced by Pewabic, just fired in their kilns. The installation of the murals turned out to be faulty, and the tiles disintegrated after about five years. (Emails from Sandy Koukoulas and Hanne Fuglsang Nielsen to Michael Padwee dated 15 Feb. 2013)]

"Sellenraad's monument today combine[d] photographic evidence, a local ceramic tradition, and union-manufactured goods. It mark[ed] the entrance to the historic Carriage Town neighborhood where the auto industry had its roots... . [...Although the] Sit-Down Strike Memorial refers to a single event in history[,...] by giving voice to labor, it goes beyond traditional memorialization. And by integrating text and graphic techniques, it provides an extraordinarily rich and complex interpretation of events." (Ronald Lee Fleming\*, "The Changing Place of Interpretation in American Public Space", p. 2; [http://places.designobserver.com/media/pdf/The\\_Changing\\_P\\_643.pdf](http://places.designobserver.com/media/pdf/The_Changing_P_643.pdf))

\*[Mr. Fleming, the founder and president of the Townscape Institute,] "Created the design parameters [...for] a ceramic tile monument on the riverfront depicting significant scenes from a major labor victory. [...Fleming] developed the concept of combining literary quotations, cast cement auto seats, and cast bronze auto hinges as part of a holistic design and animation strategy for the site adjacent to the Carriagetown Historic District." (<http://www.townscape.org/RLFCV.pdf>)



**A faux-grained bureau painted by Joe Stallone. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)**

"Joe [Stallone] is [now] a decorative painting specialist with 26 years of experience in New York City. His specialties include realistic faux wood graining and marbling, wall

glazing, gilding, faux semi-precious stone, pattern painting on floors and furniture and rare wood painted marquetry. ...Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, he learned his craft at the Institut Supérieur de Peinture in Brussels, Belgium the way it was taught in the Golden Age.” (<http://www.joestallonedecorativepainter.com/joestallonedecorativepainter/welcome.html>) He is a “specialist in high-end wall glazing, architectural gilding, faux semi-precious stones, and pattern painting on floors and furniture, Stallone is also known for using rare faux woods in painted marquetry.” (<http://www.franklinreport.com/ReportCard.aspx?v=2883>) Some of Joe’s clients have been New York City’s Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, Robert De Niro, Martha Stewart, and Baron Guy de Rothschild. Prior to this Joe was a ceramics artist and had been a graduate student at Alfred University’s College of Ceramic Art in Alfred, New York.



One of Stallone's early ceramic tea sets. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)



Another of Stallone's early ceramic pieces. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)

Prior to starting work on the murals, the CETA program administrators asked for a sample of the artists' work. Alan Samalin painted a small mural (approximately 16" x 16") on tiles prepared and fired by Joe Stallone. Johan Sellenraad also submitted a painting. Their work was accepted.



A small sample mural painted by Alan Samalin and fired by Joe Stallone. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)

Joe Stallone described the process of the making of the murals. He first built three wooden tables, each slightly larger than the size of a mural.



(Photo courtesy of Joe Stallone)



Beginning to form the murals: hand-rolled clay was kept under plastic so that the clay didn't dry before it was cut and carved into shape. The clay was turned over multiple times, using wallboards, to keep the raw tiles from warping. (Photo courtesy of Joe Stallone)



**Cutting the tile shapes**



**Getting ready to begin work. The clay was not left out in the air for more than an hour at a time.**

Joe hand-rolled the clay for each mural; then each artist used heavy-gauge plastic templates to cut the rolled clay into the tile shapes; the cut tiles were placed on mural-size wallboards on the tables to dry, which took a total of one month drying time; then Joe bisque-fired them in small batches in a kiln in his Greenwich Village loft/studio. The bisque tiles were laid out on the tables, and Alan Samalin and Johan Sellenraad painted the murals with “hobby-shop glazes”. Joe bought about 60 glazes from a local hobby shop and fired them on tiles that had been previously bisque-fired and used them as sample colors to work from.

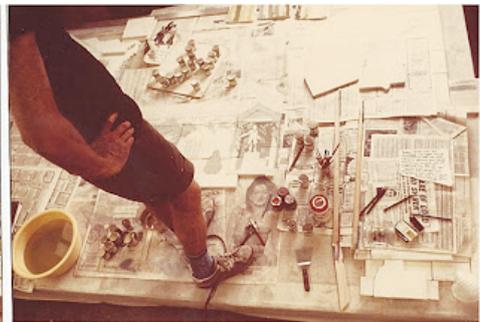


Clockwise from upper left: Alan Samalin using a template to cut the clay into tile shapes; Johan Sellenraad selecting glazes; Joe Stallone at the kiln; Alan drawing. (Photos courtesy of Joe Stallone)

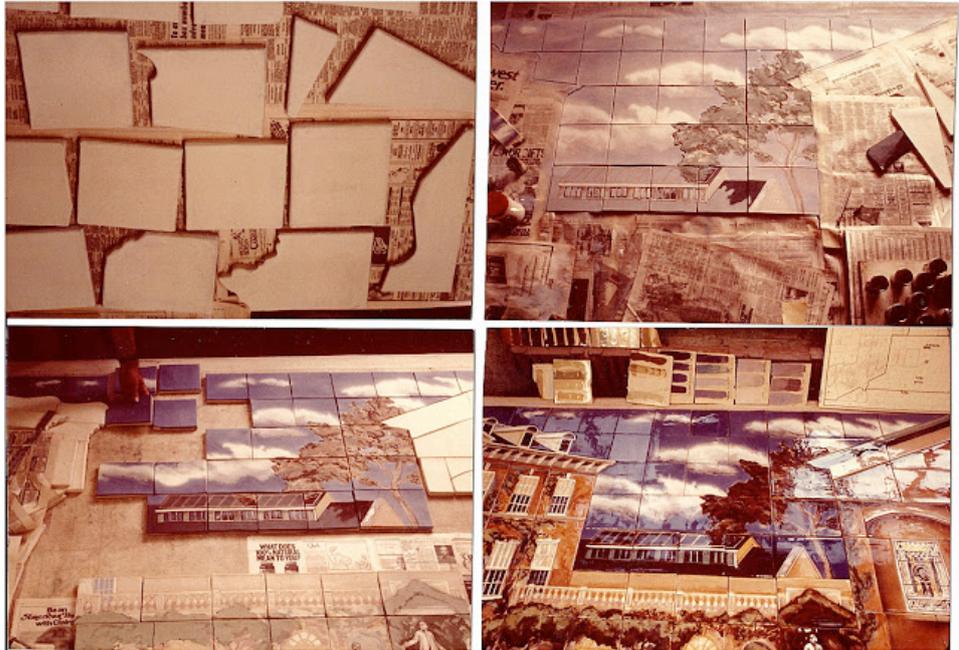
Joe protected the edges of the tiles from breaking and warping by coating them with household furniture polish. The artists painted the bisque-fired tiles with the hobby-shop under glazes.



The Promenade Mural template is in the left background.



Getting a bird's eye view of the work table.



Upper left: bisque-fired tiles before drawing and carving; Upper right: partially painted tiles; Lower left: a mixture of painted tiles, blank/cut tiles, and unpainted tiles that have been drawn on and are awaiting painting; Lower right: fully glazed and fired tiles.



Before and after photos of two areas of Alan Samalin's mural. The bottom two segments are finished and installed. (Photos courtesy of Joe Stallone)

Many of the cutlines of the tiles, as well as the grout, became part of the designs.



Cutlines and grout were used as part of Alan Samalin's mural design. (Photo courtesy of Michael Padwee)

The glazed bisque tiles were fired again in the small kiln, then a clear glaze was added, and the tiles were fired a third time. There were no extra tiles made in case one or more cracked during the firing process.\* Incredibly, no tiles broke or warped. The contractors who were to install the murals asked their father, an Italian artisan, to come from Italy to set the tile murals in the subway arcade walls.

\*Sellenraad recalls that "At Joe's we did a lot of tests [including] some double sections...", some of which he still has. (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 17 Feb. 2013)



A work table and plywood coverings for the mural walls were set up in the subway arcade.



Laying out the finished tiles.



The tiles could only be set to a height of 16" to 18". They then had to dry overnight before the next layer of tiles could be added.



(Photos courtesy of Joe Stallone)

The whole process took over a year, even though the City tried to abort the project just as the work was about to begin. Most of the materials had been purchased when word came down that the entire program had been cut. This led to demonstrations, local politicians became involved, and a community fund raising effort took place, which allowed the mural project to go forward. (Discussions with Joe Stallone, 08 Feb. and 12 Feb. 2013)

Sellenraad wrote that he thought he "...was involved longer than Joe, working out the design. After testing and community approval, etc., the production may have been done...in months. From start to finish it seemed about a year [to me]. Starting out with the MTA took time." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 17 Feb. 2013)]



The three artists protesting lay-offs and the cancellation of the CETA program. Rochelle Slovin, the head of the CETA Artists' Project, is at the extreme right. (Photo courtesy of Joe Stallone)

In 1981 the murals were dedicated, and the ceremony was attended by the community leaders and politicians who helped save the project.



Joe Stallone, Johan Sellenraad and Alan Samalin with Alan's mural. (Photo courtesy of Joe Stallone)



Joe Stallone, Johan Sellenraad and Rochelle Slovin with community leaders. (Photo courtesy of Joe Stallone)



Joe Stallone the Marathon runner and Joe in 2013.

Johan Sellenraad assessed the CETA program and these murals: "The experience of the Clark Street project made it possible for [...us] to use tiles as art. ...The basic idea was to relate the station to the immediate neighborhood... . For [my] image I picked the church [two] blocks away for its history as a stop in the underground railway bringing freed slaves North. [...There] was no integration between [...our] art and the [subway] station design, unlike the 1904 subway stations where art elements were seamlessly integrated with inspired design, i.e.[, the] City Hall Station not now open to the public\*. Eventually of course, art and subway design became more related[,] and in a way I think the Clark Street station was the precedent that made the subsequent improvements in station design possible. This includes the predominance of tile art [over the past few years]. As a medium tile art seemed to work better in tiled station[s] than...alternatives [such] as metal panels. Whether serious art is possible in that environment[,] I am still not sure... ." (Email from Johan Sellenraad to Michael Padwee dated 13 Feb. 2013)

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\*My three posts about tile art in the subway system can be accessed at:  
<http://tilesinnewyork.blogspot.com/2012/08/subway-tiles-part-i-guastavino-tiles.html>,  
<http://tilesinnewyork.blogspot.com/2012/08/subway-tiles-part-ii-heins-and-lafarge.html>,  
and  
<http://tilesinnewyork.blogspot.com/2012/09/subway-tiles-part-iii-squire-vickers-era.html>

In addition, I have added Johan Sellenraad's tile murals memorializing the 50th anniversary of the Flint, Michigan Sit-Down Strike to my "Historic U.S. Tile Installations" website at: [https://sites.google.com/site/tileinstallationdbal/mi\\_flint--sit-down-strike-murals](https://sites.google.com/site/tileinstallationdbal/mi_flint--sit-down-strike-murals).

I would like to thank Joe Stallone for his help in the researching and editing of this article, and for the loan of his photos documenting the mural project from start to finish. I would also like to thank Johan Sellenraad for his insights and remembrances, and for the use of his photos. Also, my thanks to Sandy Koukoulas, Public Relations Representative, and Hanne Fuglsang Nielsen, Archivist, of Pewabic Pottery, and Paul Gifford, Archivist of the University of Michigan-Flint Labor History Project for their help.

#### **Links:**

[Alan Samalin](#)

[Johan Sellenraad](#)

[Joe Stallone](#)

[Pewabic Pottery](#)

[University of Michigan Labor History Project](#)