

The Ceramic Tiles and Murals of Jean Nison

Michael Padwee



Jean Nison, 1953¹

A few weeks ago California tile preservationist [Brian Kaiser](#), contacted me and asked if I knew of Jean Nison and her tile commissions. Brian had recently saved one of her murals from certain destruction--a double dragon mural in the bathroom of the Tichenor House in Long Beach, California--and was in the process of restoring it.

¹ UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Johan Hagemeyer, photographer, Object ID: BANC PIC 1964.063--NEG Nison, Jean -- 008; <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5c600792/?order=1>

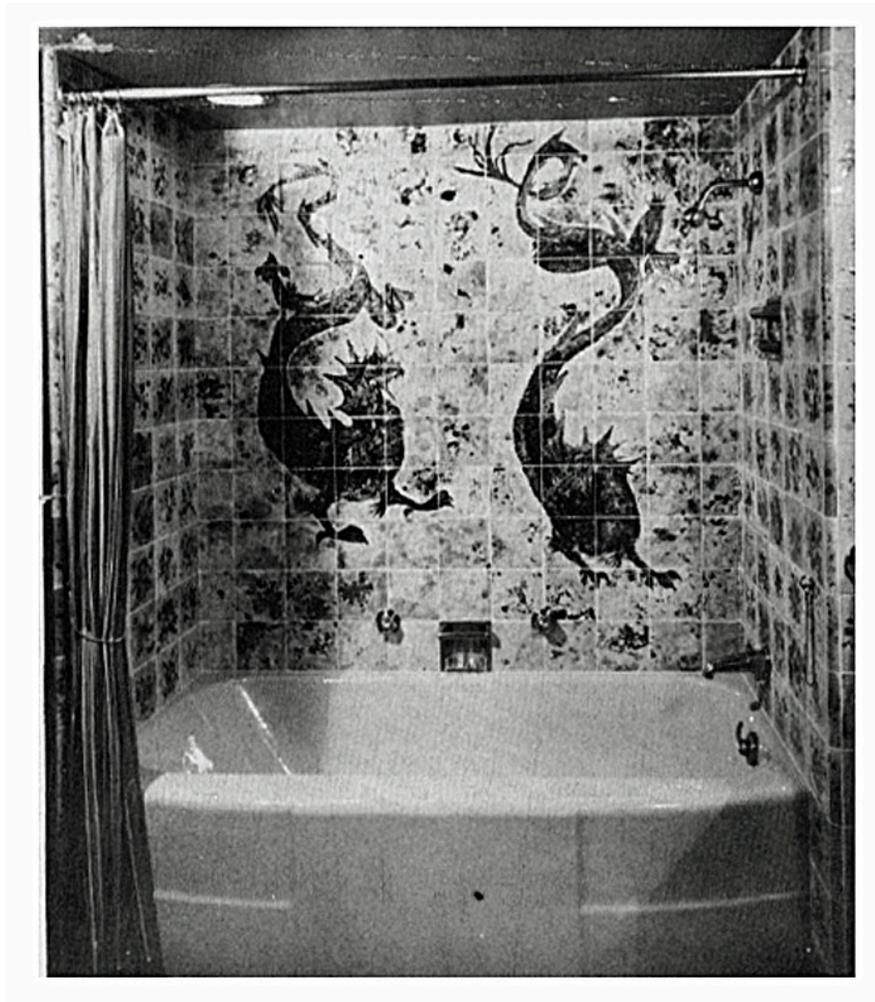


Part of Jean Nison's double dragon tile mural, c. 1953, rescued by Brian Kaiser. Note her use of "bubbling" in the glazes of the tiles. This effect was obtained by the mixing of gold and other metals with the glaze and dripping it onto the tile before firing. (Photo courtesy of Brian Kaiser)

The Tichenor House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was built in 1904-1905 by the architects Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene for Adelaide Tichenor, a civic leader and philanthropist who founded the Ebell Club in her home and established an orthopedic clinic that bears her name.

"[The] Tichenor House was one of only three homes constructed in Long Beach by the

renowned architectural team of Charles and Henry Greene.... . The Greene brothers refined the familiar low-profile, wide-porch Craftsman bungalow with their skilled use of wood craftsmanship, and the influence of their early study of Japanese art and architecture. From its crooked clinker brick and timbered wood exterior to the hand-painted silk wallpaper and huge slate fireplace in the second-story sitting room, the Tichenor House provides an excellent example of the Greene brothers' ability to blend Oriental themes in an occidental house.



The full double dragon mural in the master bathroom. (Photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library)

“The house was extensively remodeled [...by architect Adrian Wilson and his associate, Alden Becker, in 1953] with many modern changes to the interior,”² including the addition of Nison’s tile mural. “Wilson took part of the upstairs balcony, and converted it into a Master Bath for the Master Bedroom. [...The owners, Dr. and Mrs. William Casselberry] hired [Nison], to create a very rare, one-of a kind ceramic tile [mural] for that

² http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-05/news/hl-2211_1_tichenor-house

room, ...a fantastic mural forming the wall behind the bathtub. It was composed of some organic-style tile covered with Gold Blisters, and had two very large dragons [...pictured on the tiles]. The mural was about 7 feet by 7 feet in size. Jean's signature is in the lower right hand corner of the mural.”³

In December of 2011 a fire started in the rear of the house and was extinguished in about twenty minutes.⁴

“The fire in the [bath]room must have been very intense, because the tile was covered with soot that was burned onto the surface of the tile face. The tile also had a crackle glaze, which has many very tiny cracks over the entire surface. This was intentional, and reflects the style of the tile. Unfortunately, the soot permeated the crackle glaze... .”⁵

Kaiser became involved after the insurance adjuster said the bathroom was totaled and should be demolished. The owner of the house contacted the [Tile Heritage Foundation](#), and through them, Kaiser, who successfully saved the mural in the two weeks allowed to him before the bathroom was demolished.

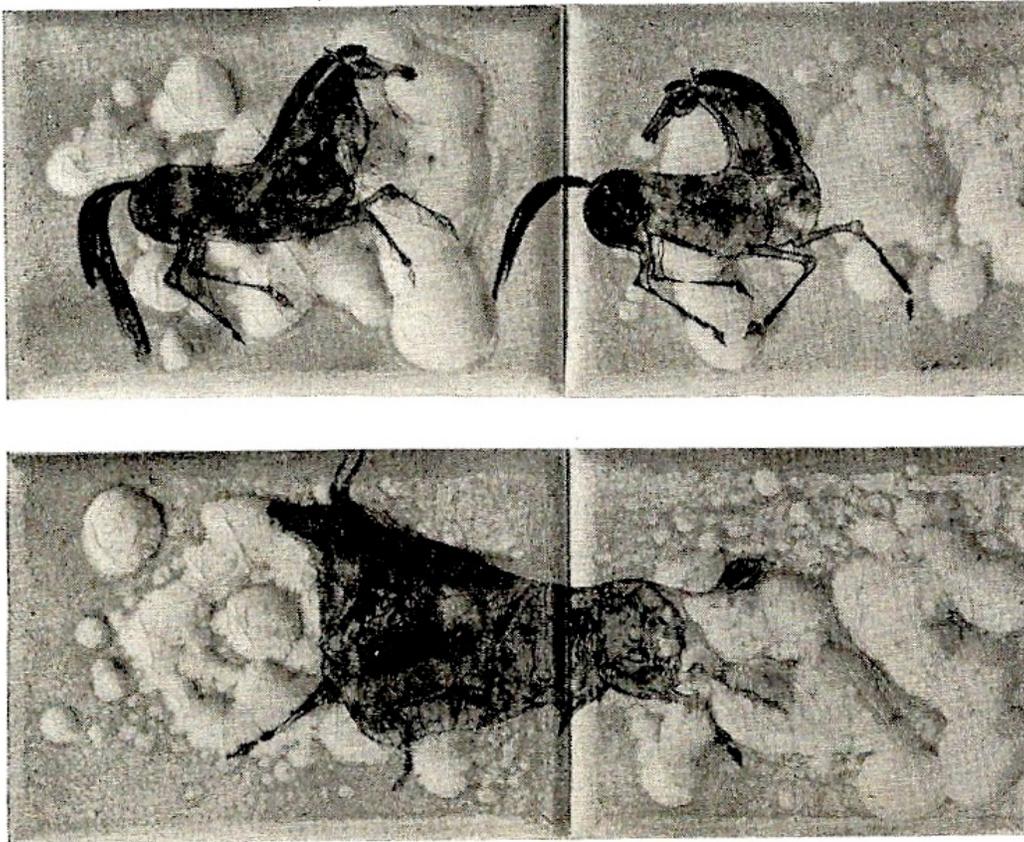
When Nison obtained the commission for this mural, she had been involved with ceramics for only about five years. In an article published in *American Artist* magazine in 1954 Nison states that she was mostly self-taught as a ceramic artist: “I began experimenting by myself; I am too undisciplined to work in a class, too impatient to carry out the step-by-step routine [class] assignments... . I preferred to go it alone, believing that this way offered a greater chance of striking out on a more original road. I knew I would have to learn what not to do the hard way, but that is the way I took! ...Gradually I came to know what effects and what ends I was after, what kind of subject matter and what technical effects I preferred. I devoted myself to the study of decoration and its appropriate application to ceramics... . I tried to purge my drawing of every nonessential. I wanted to capture on tile the richness of enamel with drawings as simple and dramatic as possible. Animals and mythological subjects interested me especially.”⁶

³ <http://www.justanswer.com/antiques/7ehtb-ra-jpm.html>

⁴ <http://www.presstelegram.com/technology/20111212/fire-strikes-historic-tichenor-house>

⁵ <http://www.justanswer.com/antiques/7ehtb-ra-jpm.html>

⁶ Jean Nison, “Jean Nison discusses her Ceramic Tiles”, *American Artist*, Vol. 18, No. 6, Summer 1954, p. 60.



(Photo from Jean Nison, "Ceramic Tiles", *American Artist*, Vol. 18, No. 6, Summer 1954, p. 61)

Nison experimented with glazes, bubbling effects, and paints. "My first experiments were with glazes—usually mixtures—in an attempt to get a variety of color with underglaze and yet not be limited to the monotony of a glazed white background. After some time I was able to work out the problem. The underglaze colors were modified, but not muddied, by a colored, transparent glaze over the drawing, and a new textural effect which is still peculiar to my tiles. This gives a three-dimensional quality to the drawing, enriches the color and causes irregular bubbles on the surface."⁷

According to Robert Pinart*, Jean Nison's first husband, she fired her tiles twice. She purchased tile biscuit blanks, painted her background and main designs on the blanks, and fired the tiles in a kiln in Fred Farr's** studio in Greenwich Village. She would then mix her gold and other metallic glazes until they were a very viscous liquid, and thickly apply the liquid onto the tiles with a brush. Nison would then fire the tiles a second time at a very low temperature. Mr Pinart said if a mistake was made and the firing temperature was too high, the gold would burn off.

⁷ Jean Nison, "Fantasies in Tile", *Craft Horizons*, Vol. 13, No. 3, May-June, 1953, p.37.

*[In the course of doing research for this article, I was able to locate and, on May 8, 2014, interview Jean Nison's first husband, Robert Pinart, an internationally renowned stained glass artist. His remembrances of Ms. Nison are included in this article.]

**[Fred Farr (1914-1973) was a sculptor, ceramic artist and mid-century modern jewelry-maker. In the 1950s he was a ceramics instructor at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Fred Farr exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and in many other museums and galleries in the United States, Haiti and South America. He was represented by the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, New York.⁸ Robert Pinart said that Farr and Jean Nison were friends, and he allowed Nison to use his kilns for her tile work.]

According to Kaiser, Nison used very thin, very brittle, talc-body tile for her murals. “One of the most striking features of the tile, is the fact that Ms. Nison had a very unique element to her style. Her basic field tiles have a very ‘Organic’ appearance, with splotches of color dropped on the tile in a completely random manner. In addition, she used large quantities of Gold, which were so thick, that it created bulges or ‘blisters’ on the surface of the tile. This gave the tile a very pronounced texture, and they were not really flat at all. Dr. Jamison[, the current owner of the Tichenor House,] believes that the Gold was 24kt Gold. The Gold would have to be tested to confirm that. I also do not know how much the Gold would be diluted in the glaze, so it could be easily applied.”⁹ Gold is very toxic to use, as well as expensive. Nison’s glazes in this mural also contained lead, which cannot be used today because of its toxicity. In a telephone conversation, Robert Pinart mentioned that Ms. Nison obtained her bubbling effect partially by firing the glazed tiles at different low temperatures, like his own stained glass creations.¹⁰ Mr. Pinart said the expense of the gold did not matter to Nison. It was always the effect that mattered to her.¹¹

⁸ “The Brooklyn Museum Art School, Courses in Ceramics” pamphlet, Fall Term, September 1951

⁹ <http://www.justanswer.com/antiques/7ehtb-ra-jpm.html>

¹⁰ Telephone conversation between Mr. Pinart and the author, 4-30-2014

¹¹ Author’s interview with Mr. Pinart, May 8, 2014.



(Photo from Jean Nison, "Ceramic Tiles", *American Artist*, Vol. 18, No. 6, Summer 1954, p. 61)

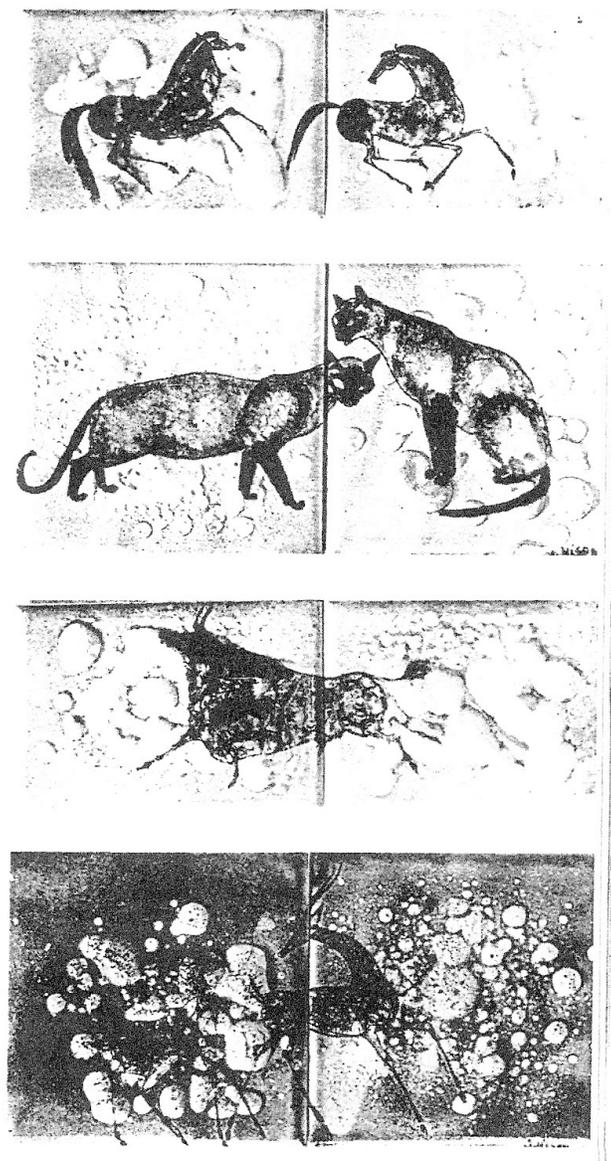
According to Robert Pinart, Nison's first exhibition was in 1952 at America House. "America House was a retail sales outlet founded by Mrs. Vanderbilt Webb in New York in 1940. It was open for thirty years, beginning on East Fifty-fourth Street moving to Madison Avenue at Fifty-second Street three years later; and finally in 1960 to 44 West Fifty-third Street where it closed January 31, 1971."¹²

Later, in late 1952, during the depths of the Cold War, "to refute the impression fairly widely held abroad that our culture is a purely mechanistic one," the State Department "arranged a series of exhibits for 'export' overseas to demonstrate facets of our cultural life. One of these, a collection of handicrafts by contemporary American craftsmen, ...will be sent to Turkey, Greece and India."¹³ Jean Nison's ceramic tiles were among the crafts to be sent abroad, and this is the first mention of her ceramics in the press that I was able to find.

¹² <http://digital.craftcouncil.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15785coll5/id/3654>

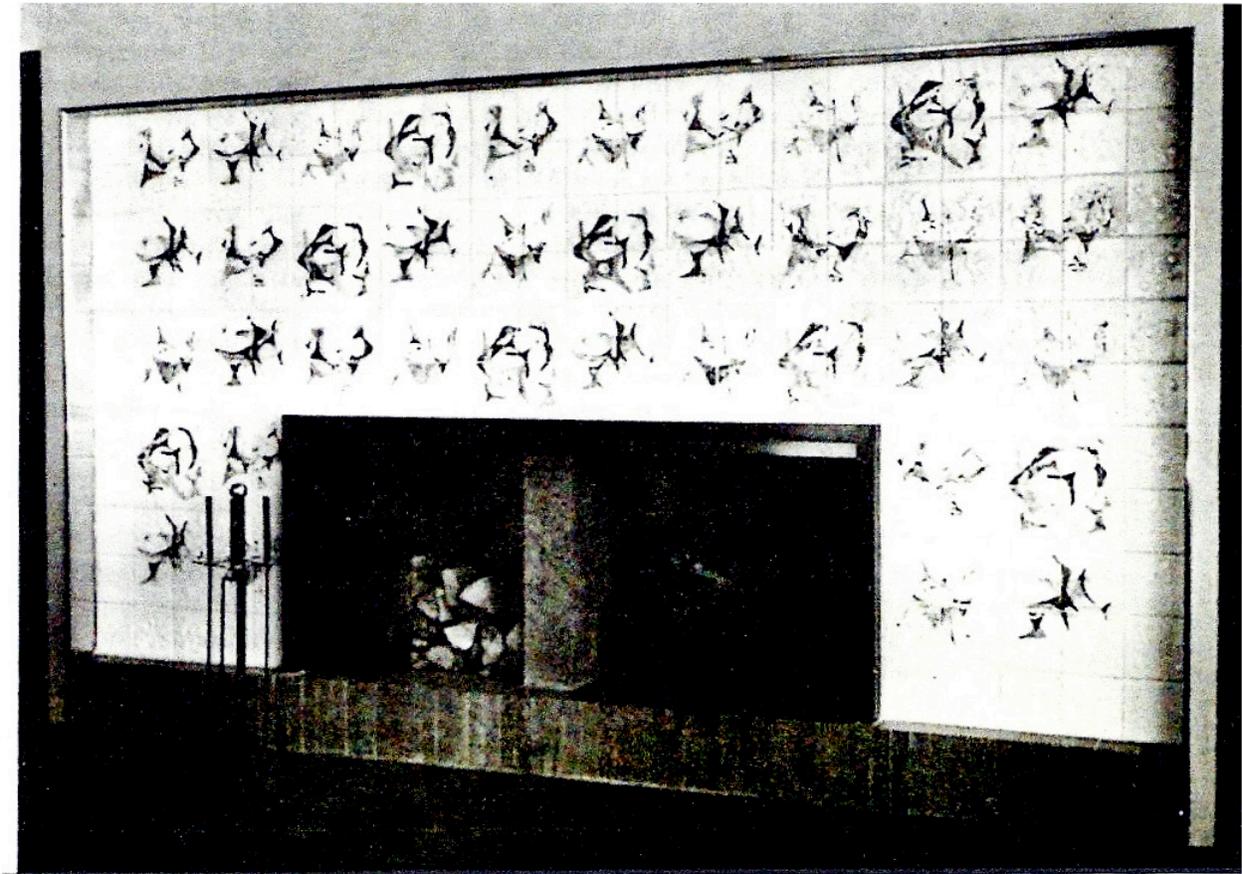
¹³ Betty Pepis, "Handicrafts of the United States", *The New York Times*, October 12, 1952.

Jean Nison also met Robert Pinart in 1952. She was a salesperson in a bookstore in Rockefeller Center, and he was purchasing a book about architecture. Mr. Pinart said he was fairly new to the United States at the time and was working for Rambusch Studios. He was very impressed by Nison's command of the French language, and her knowledge of many subjects that also interested him.



Nison's subject matter at first focused on animals, but she began working with abstract shapes when she obtained a commission for Lever House in Manhattan. According to Nison, she visited decorators, left tiles with them and hoped they would call her. This was how, she believed, [Raymond Lowey Associates](#), the industrial design firm, asked her to make a wall decoration for Lever House, at that time the headquarters of Lever Brothers Corporation. I contacted the curator of the Lever House art collection, Mr.

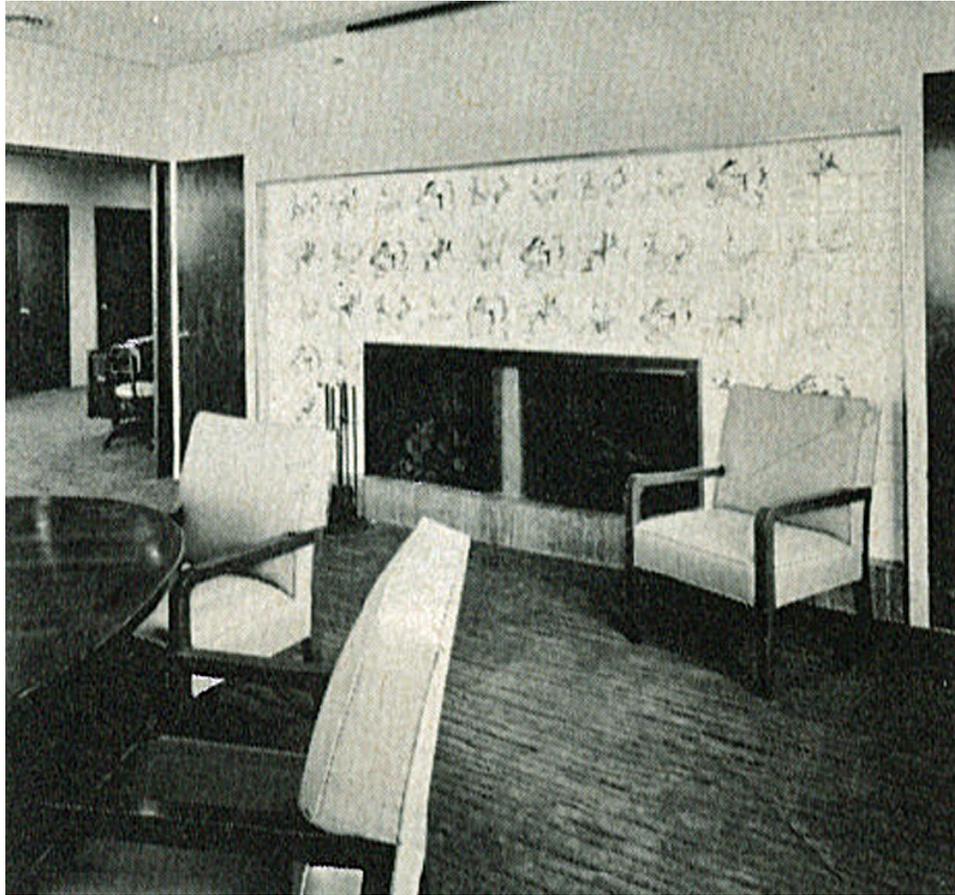
Richard Marshall, but he had no information about the fate of Nison's tile installation. Unilever Corporation moved out of the building in the 1980s, and may have taken the tiles with them. A request to Unilever for information, however, went unanswered.



(Photo from the *Craft Horizons* article)

A 1953 *Craft Horizons* article¹⁴ has a poor image of Nison's tiled fireplace surround in the Lever Brothers boardroom. Nison described the tiles as having four different abstract designs, which were chosen by Raymond Lowey Associates and/or Lever Brothers out of about a thousand she submitted. The four designs or icons selected were "vital and modern" and showed a "beauty of tonal relationship and shape." It is our loss that the original fireplace surround probably no longer exists, and color photos also do not seem to exist.

¹⁴ Jean Nison, "Fantasies in Tile", *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XIII, No. 3, May-June 1953, p. 36+



Another photo of the Lever Brothers tile installation in Lever House. (Image in the artist's file, and courtesy of the American Crafts Council Library)

Nison explained the process by which she creates multiple tile murals: “For a composition involving several tiles I first make a pencil drawing on paper and transfer it onto an assembled group of tiles. Although I visualize the color scheme I want, I do not try to color the sketch. This really would be rather purposeless since what happens in...glazing can not be anticipated.



Jean Nison working with her glazes in an undated photo. (Photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library)

“The colors are worked into the design in underglaze or in mixtures of several glazes and underglaze in an effort to achieve certain desired effects of color and texture. Actual glazes are much richer in color than mere underglaze colors... . Because of the difficulty of approximating ceramic colors and textures on paper, in sketches submitted for a client’s approval I always work out a section or a miniature version of the design in actual ceramics.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Jean Nison, “Ceramic Tiles”, *American Artist*, Vol. 18, No. 6, Summer 1954, pp. 61, 84-85.



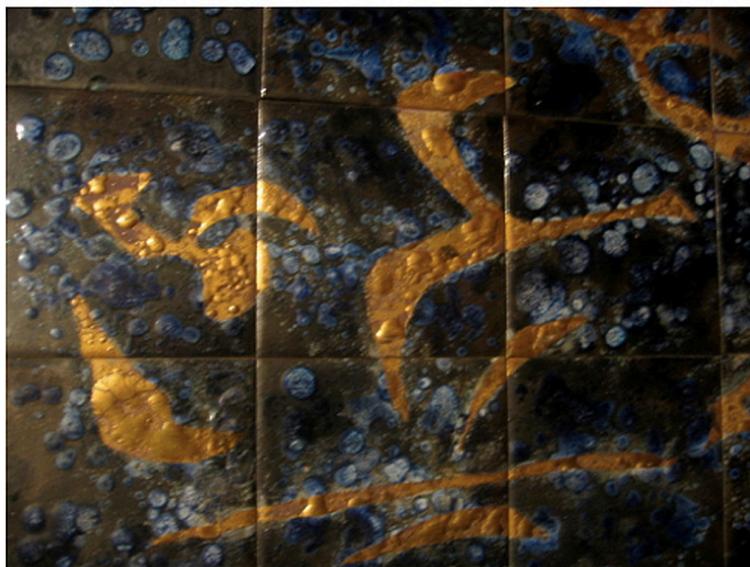
A tile panel with “Medieval feeling”. (From the 1953 *Craft Horizons* article)

Although Jean Nison painted some tiles with scenes “as far removed from the Twentieth Century as possible,” she was also caught up in the Mid-century Modern movement. In 1953 an article in the *New York Times* discussed modern ceramic tile designers such as Alexandra Kasuba, Harris Strong, Werner Prins and Jean Nison: “The development of a variety of decorating styles has accompanied the revival of tile design, with the result that collections of such objects resemble an art gallery.” The *Times* reported that Nison used a tile mural of classic figures standing in a grove of trees as the center of a table made by Zarch Sourian. The tile glazes were pale blues touched with bronze color. The thick, textured clear glaze used on top imparts a misty look.¹⁶

¹⁶ “For the Home: Tiles Enhance Variety of Objects”, *The New York Times*, February 25, 1953.



One of Nison's multi-tile panels with abstract animal designs from this period is shown above. It was described as a "plaque consisting of twenty five [sic] ceramic tiles encased in a bronze band. Tiles are in hues of cobalt, brown, and light blue with designs in gold drippings."¹⁷ It was sold privately. Below is a close-up view:



The bubbling of the gold-infused glaze is evident.

¹⁷

http://www.1stdibs.com/furniture/wall-decorations/decorative-art/fabulous-tile-plaque-encased-bronze-signed-nison/id-f_197133/

Pinart said that Nison worked on commissions obtained through a man named "Lippincott", later identified as J. Gordon Lippincott of the Lippincott and Margulies design firm. The archivist of the current Lippincott firm, Erika Rosenberg, suggested I contact Jonathan Lippincott, J. Gordon Lippincott's grandson, who had some of his grandfather's papers. Mr. Lippincott discovered that his grandfather hired Jean Nison to create tile work that was permanently installed as part of the Lippincott house in Scarsdale (built in 1951-52), but there were no records of other commissions for Lippincott & Margulies in the family papers.

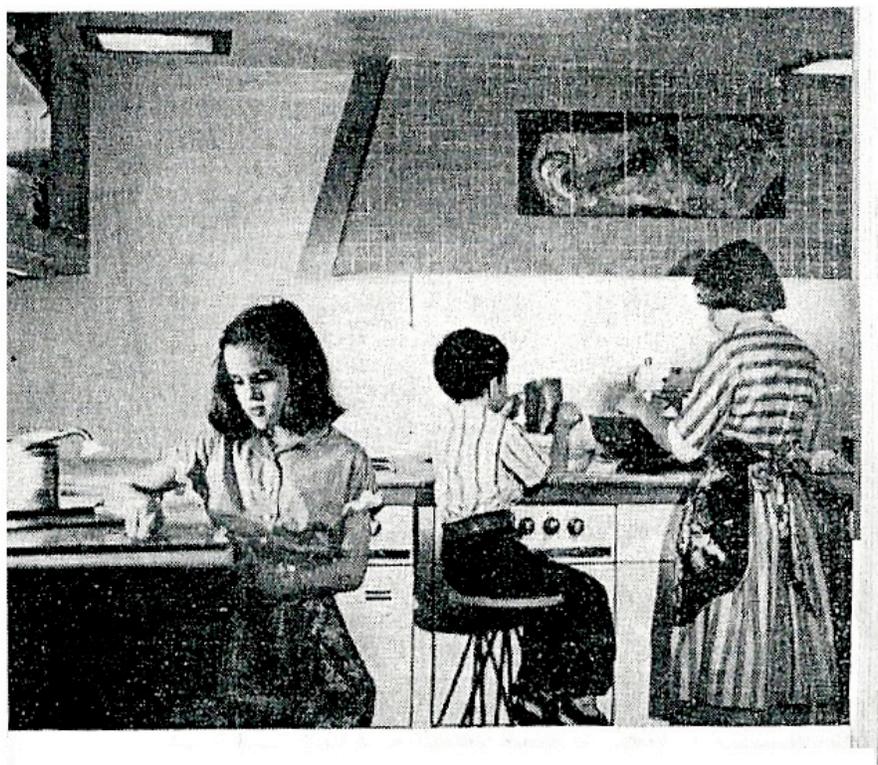


The Lippincott House, Scarsdale, New York.¹⁸

House Beautiful featured this house in the September 1953 issue, and a recent report by the Village of Scarsdale states that "Although Scarsdale does not have the concen-

¹⁸ "They Designed Their House to Enrich Their Family Life", *House Beautiful*, Vol. 95, September 1953, pp. 138-145

tration of Modern houses by famous architects found in places such as New Canaan, Connecticut, there are a number of excellent examples of Mid-century Modernism in the village. [...A] few Modern houses were...built [in the Fox Meadow section of Scarsdale], most importantly the home of Mr. and Mrs. J. Gordon Lippincott...designed in 1950 by Ray S. Johnson and J. Stein... Lippincott, a partner in the firm of Lippincott & Margulies, was one of the leading industrial designers of the mid-twentieth century... ."19



(Photo: "They Designed Their House to Enrich Their Family Life", *House Beautiful*, Vol. 95, September 1953, pp. 138-145)

Nison's contribution was three tile installations--a rooster above the kitchen stove, a built-in tile table and a tile mural of bulls at the house entrance--according to Dalia and Merrill Berman, who were, and still are, the second owners of this Modernist house. The rooster panel can be seen in one of the photos from the *House Beautiful* article (above) and in the contemporary photo below.

¹⁹ Li-Saltzman Architects and Andrew Dolkart, "Reconnaissance Level Cultural Resource Survey Report", Village of Scarsdale, New York, July 12, 2012, pp. 3-18, 7-17



The roosters tiles are set in the kitchen's exhaust hood over the cooking range and form a 30" X 12" mural. (Photographer: Itai Taubenfeld; photo courtesy of Merrill and Dalia Berman.)



The bulls are embedded in the entrance hall's floor and are 18" X 24". (Photographer: Itai Taubenfeld; photo courtesy of Merrill and Dalia Berman.)

The tiles below are part of the built-in kitchen table: 31" X 40". The Bermans assume the table is also the work of Jean Nison. Legend has it that the tiles for the table did not emerge from the firing as expected but were loved by the Lippincotts as they were.²⁰



Part of the built-in tile table.

Many tiles manufactured by the Mosaic Tile Company of Zanesville, Ohio were used on floors and walls throughout the house in order to promote a “care-free” quality of life for the family.

²⁰ Email from Dalia Berman to Michael Padwee, June 18, 2014.

The perfect blending of natural wood walls, beamed ceilings and Mosaic Faience Tile—in cool-as-mint green!

Easy-to-clean Ceramic Mosaic Tile floor in living-kitchen. For that extra touch of beauty in use . . . the Ceramic Mosaic range hood and a table top of decorated Mosaic Tile.

Weather, sun and moisture-resistant window sill of 1" x 1" Faience Mosaic Tile in Lippincott bedroom. Convenient! Permanent! Beautiful!

*noted designer
dramatizes own home
with **Mosaic Clay Tile!***

Designer J. Gordon Lippincott's new Scarsdale, N.Y. home is a glowing exhibit of Mosaic Clay Tile in trend setting uses. In room after room, Mr. Lippincott gave voice to his creative imagination with the modern beauty and texture of this timeless material. You, too, will find inspiration in Mosaic Clay Tile.

For helpful literature on the many types of Mosaic Clay Tile, write Dept. 28-25, The Mosaic Tile Company, Zanesville, Ohio. "The Tile Handbook," published by the Tile Council of America, will help you specify. And remember—you and your clients are always welcome at our showrooms and at those of your Tile Contractors.

For Free Estimates see **CONTRACTOR** tile, see your phone book for the name of your local Tile Contractor

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An ad from a 1955 *House Beautiful* magazine showing the Mosaic Tile Company's tile work throughout the house. Nison's tile kitchen table can be seen in the top right photo.

Jonathan Lippincott said that Nison's tile panels went with his grandparents' artistic aesthetic: they enjoyed traveling in Mexico, Central and South America and collected masks and other local crafts; also, when the house was sold some non-permanent tile panels, such as "The Toreador", made by Nison were retained by the family.



A 12" x 24", 8-tile "Toreador" panel in the possession of the Lippincott family. Nison's signature is in the lower right corner. (Photo courtesy of Jonathan Lippincott and the Lippincott family)

The "Arts of Daily Living" Exhibition



Wall mural (left) created by Jean Nison for the Plant-Lover's Bathroom in the "Arts of Daily Living Exhibition" in Pomona, CA in 1954.²¹

In 1954 one of her murals was featured in the "Arts of Daily Living Exhibition" in Pomona, California. The objects in the rooms, and the rooms themselves in this exhibition were considered the epitome in personal comfort that the post-war middle class should be aspiring to.

²¹ Courtesy of Huntington Library, Photo Archives; Photographer, Maynard Parker. <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt338nd8k8/?order=1>; color photo scanned from "The Bathroom, Our Refuge from Stress", *House Beautiful*, Vol. 97, No. 3, March 1955, p. 115.



A close-up of Nison's mural.

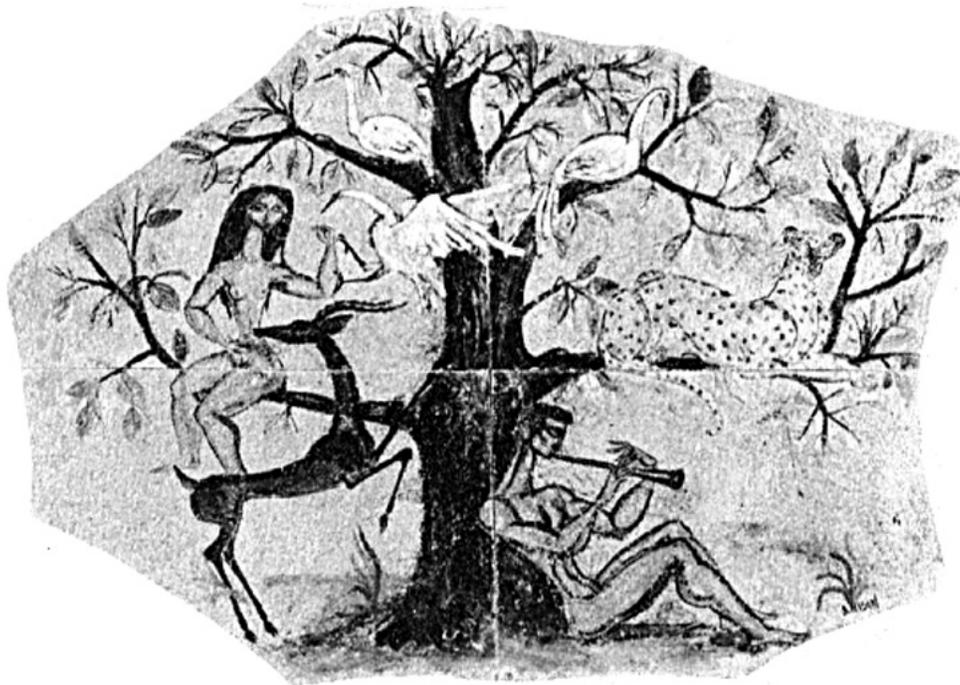
“In the Fine Arts Building of the 1954 L.A. County Fair, Millard Sheets, director of exhibitions—an accomplished painter, influential chair of Scripps College’s art department, designer of dozens of bank mosaics, and all around art impresario—collaborated closely with the staff of *House Beautiful* magazine to produce an extraordinary installation of 22 architect-designed model rooms.”²² Nison’s contribution was the tile wall mural in the “Plant Lover’s Bathroom” designed by the architect John de Koven Hill*. Again, there is no further record of this mural except the photo and a brief article in *House Beautiful* magazine (March 1955) which states that a “Glamorous diffusion of light and the curious, subaqueous quality of Jean Nison’s ceramic tile mural create the illusion of other-world-ness, hence seclusion.”

²² Thea M. Page, “EXHIBITIONS | When the L.A. County Fair Was Totally Mod”; <http://huntingtonblogs.org/2011/11/jeremy-adamson-lecture/>

House Beautiful says of this exhibit that the rooms "are filled with things of grace and meaning, possessed with the function of beauty as well as the beauty of function. They show the best in today's living, as the best is actually being enjoyed in many homes across the country... . [The] 22 rooms of the exhibition are distinctly of our world and time; they are the product of our people; they have whatever quality we have."²³ "The 22 rooms...were created to show the best in today's living. They are intended to express the philosophy that true culture begins at home, and that as your interests grow and widen your home acquires beauty by reflecting your own expanding life."²⁴

*[John deKoven Hill was the architectural editor for **House Beautiful** at the time and designed most of the room exhibits in the show.²⁵]

Jean Nison also exhibited her ceramics at the Architectural League of New York from November 20-December 4, 1954. The Architectural League of New York rented its Pine Room exhibit space to local artists, and Nison exhibited twenty panels of her tile work there.²⁶



²³ "Here is the New American Beauty", **House Beautiful**, Vol. 96, No. 10, October 1954, p. 191.

²⁴ "Rooms for a Lively Life", **House Beautiful**, Vol. 96, No. 10, October 1954, p. 168.

²⁵<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?style=oac4;view=dsc;docId=kt6k4034m6;query=John%20deKoven%20Hill;dsc.position=10001;#hitNum3>

²⁶ "Architectural League of New York records, 1880s-1974, bulk 1927-1968", Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 67, Folder 14.

In April 1955 Nison's tiles were featured in the second of a series of monthly exhibits of contemporary craftsmen in the Brooklyn Museum Gallery Shop. The exhibit notice stated that Ms. Nison exhibited at the Architectural League of New York, America House Gallery in New York, Gumps in San Francisco, and the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, New York.²⁷

In 1957 Nison was chosen to participate in a 1957-58 exhibit, "The Patron Church", at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Art and Design in Manhattan). This was "an exhibition of over 200 ceremonial objects in nearly all media of the arts and crafts."²⁸ In this exhibit "emphasis will be placed on the position of the church as an important patron of architects, artists and craftsmen who are prominent in the field of modern design. Featured in the display will be outstanding examples of contemporary Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religious architecture, which will be shown in scale models, photo murals and color transparencies. ...Accompanying the architecture many examples of original work...by leading artists and craftsmen will be displayed."²⁹



A photo of part of a multi-tile mural by Jean Nison from the ACC Member Files, Digital File No. D014-038. Image based on the exhibition "The Patron Church" held at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York City from October 11, 1957 through January 5, 1958. (Note the bubbling effect from gold and silver, mixed with glaze and dropped onto the tiles.)

²⁷ Notice and image in the artist's file of the American Craft Council Library, 1224 Marshall Street NE, Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55413

²⁸ Robert Bradbury, "The Patron Church", *Craft Horizons*, December 1957.

²⁹ "Church Art and Architecture at Crafts Museum", press release from the Museum of Contemporary Crafts dated September 12, 1957.

Nison was represented by two ceramic tile pieces.³⁰ The first was a tile mural titled “Station of the Cross”. The photo above, located in the artists’ digital records of the American Crafts Council, may be a symbolic representation of a Station, or the Stations, of the Cross, with a Greek Alpha appended to it, and is probably one of tile murals Nison exhibited.



”Alpha and Omega”, Jean Nison, Egyptian, 1957, Glazed ceramic, wood.
19 3/4 x 19 3/4 x 1 1/4 in. (50.2 x 50.2 x 3.2 cm), Gift of the artist, through the American Craft Council, 1958.
PHOTO: ED WATKINS, NYC 2008. (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY)

The other ceramic tile panel of Nison’s in this exhibit was a nine-tile mural, “Alpha and Omega”, which referred to Revelations 22:13 in the ***New Testament*** where Jesus

³⁰ *The Patron Church: Catalog of an exhibition held October 11, 1957 through January 5, 1958 at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York City*, Tibbs, Thomas S. and Laurer, Robert A., contributors, 1957, p. 20.

states, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."³¹ "The letters Alpha and Omega in juxtaposition are often used as a Christian visual symbol. The letters were shown hanging from the arms of the cross in Early Christian art... . This phrase is interpreted by many Christians to mean that Jesus has existed for all eternity. The phrase "alpha and omega" may signify that God is eternal."³² The chi and rho letters above the alpha and omega represent Jesus Christ and come from the Greek word "ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ" which means Christ.³³ This mural is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Arts and Design.³⁴

When this exhibit ended, Nison exhibited some of her ceramic tiles--possibly those above--at an art symposium, "Art and Christian Life", at St. Joseph's College for Women in Brooklyn, New York, in February, 1958.³⁵

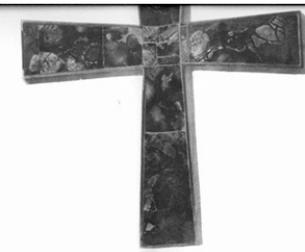
³¹ <http://biblehub.com/revelation/22-13.htm>

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alpha_and_Omega

³³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chrismon>

³⁴ http://collections.madmuseum.org/code/emuseum.asp?emu_action=searchrequest&newsearch=1&moduleid=1&profile=objects¤trecord=1&style=single&rawsearch=id/,is/,7/,false/,true

³⁵ "St. Joseph's Alumnae Sponsor Art Symposium", *Alumnagram*, St. Joseph's College for Women, Vol. 9, No. 2, Winter 1958, p.4.



MURAL COMMISSION BY ELISABETH DRAPER FOR ROOSEVELT HOSPITAL NEW YORK CITY

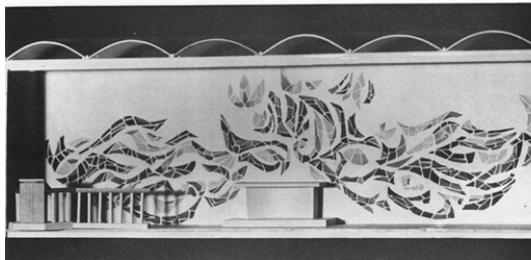
ALTAR FRONT FOR SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS CHURCH, BERKELEY, CALIF.

CARVED WOOD AND TILE FRAME FOR T.W.A. AMBASSADOR'S LOUNGE, CHICAGO - COMMISSION BY RAYMOND LOEWY



JEAN NISON
35 SPRING STREET
NEW YORK CITY 10012
226-0342

MONOGRAM BRAZED STEEL AND TILE



PROJECT FOR A PRESBYTERIAN CHAPEL

Undated poster (c.1960 or later) from the artist's file in the American Craft Council Library, 1224 Marshall Street NE, Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55413.

Although *Craft Horizons* stated that Jean Nison participated in another exhibition of religious arts in 1958 at the Dallas Museum of Fine Art, there was no mention of her as an exhibitor in the exhibit catalog.³⁶ Of the exhibition *Craft Horizons* wrote: "...two years in the making, 'Religious Art of the Western World', presented some of the most interesting and valuable ecclesiastical objects from medieval times to the 20th century...at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts... Among the contemporary craftsmen included were: Robert Sowers, Mariska Karasz, Anni Albers, Jan Yoors, Allan Porter, Talbot Studios, Robert Pinart, Jean Nison, Jean de Marco, Janet de Coux, Ludwig Wolpert, Karl Drerup, Henry Lee Willet, Jack Larsen."³⁷ Although the Dallas Museum of Art's digital records of exhibiting artists,³⁸ also did not list Nison as an exhibitor in that exhibit, Dallas Museum of Art Digital Archivist, Hillary Bober, did locate a listing for Jean Nison and her contribution to

³⁶ "Religious Art of the Western World", Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, March 23-May25, 1958; <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph183401/m1/3/>

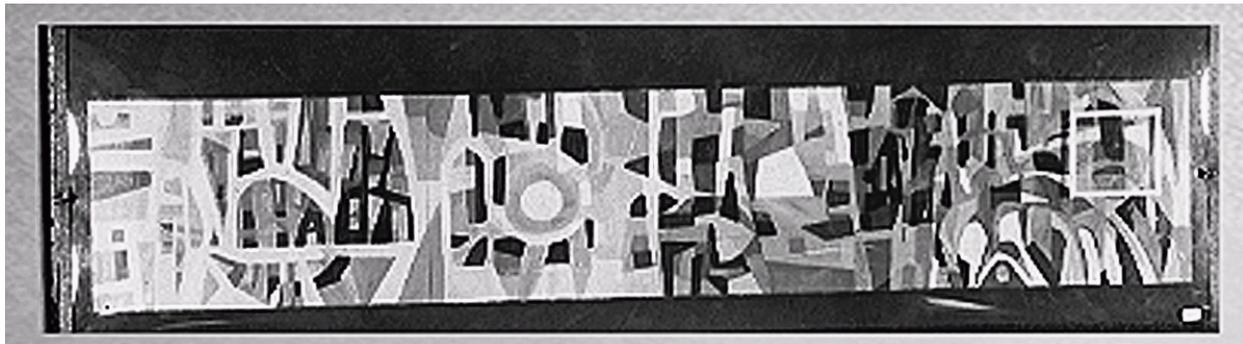
³⁷ *Craft Horizons*, Vol. 18, No. 4, July-August 1958, p. 47.

³⁸ <http://www.dm-art.org/research/archives>

this exhibit.³⁹ Unfortunately, the Dallas Museum did not have a pictorial record of Nison's work.

Written material for this exhibition--possibly a press release from the Dallas Museum of Art--states that the "exhibit will not be an outline or history of religions, but will attempt to use art objects as symbols of the religious spirit. The main intention of the exhibition is to indicate the relationship between art and religion of the past and the present, and to explore the possibilities of a closer, more fruitful union for the immediate future."⁴⁰

The La Guardia Houses Competition



Nison/Pinart mural competition entry. The New York City Housing Authority Photo # 02.003.27988, (<http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/ImageDetail.aspx>), from the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College/The City University of New York.

In October 1958, a competition sponsored by the [Henry Street Settlement](#) was held to select a mural to be installed in the community center at [La Guardia Houses](#) on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A \$300 second prize went to Robert Pinart and Jean Nison, a husband and wife team, for their entry.⁴¹ Pinart, who would become an internationally renowned stained glass artist, and Nison were married at this time and worked together on at least two projects.⁴² According to Robert Pinart (Telephone conversation with the author, 4-30-2014 and interview on 5-8-2014), the competition was to fill a flat wall space that had no back-lighting with a mural. Thus, the mural would have been all ceramic or ceramic mosaic, rather than glass, had they won the competition. Pinart said he thought the design on the left side of the mural was more his than Nison's, and the design on the right side of the mural was more Jean's. The colors of the mural would have been beige and ochre with a deep, dark background. The size of the winning mural by Elemer Polony

³⁹ "Religious Art of the Western World, Catalogue list of all objects in exhibition...": "JEAN NISON, American 476. Pair of tile plaques, ceramic. Designs of Christian symbols."

⁴⁰ http://files.dma.org/multimedia/document/145355466815371_original.pdf, p. 2

⁴¹ <http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/ImageDetail.aspx>

⁴² "Mural Selected for East Side Houses", *The New York Times*, October 23, 1958. Also, Pinart's personal portfolio has his address as 119 E. 28th Street, New York City, the same as Ms. Nison's address; <http://antiquessupplycenter.com/pinart-stained-glass>

was 28' long x 5.5' high, and it is assumed that the Nison-Pinart mural would also have been in that size range. [It should be noted that Jean Nison and Robert Pinart were both represented in the same museum exhibitions--"The Patron Church" and "Religious Art of the Western World"--but this may have been the first time they collaborated on a specific work.]



**Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, 401 Grizzly Peak Blvd., Berkeley, CA.
(Photo courtesy of Google Maps)**

Sometime in 1959/60 Jean Nison and Robert Pinart obtained commissions to design the tiles for the altar and baptismal font, and for the stained glass windows, of the Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Berkeley, California.



Jean Nison's tiled altar in the Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church. (<http://www.sothb.org/>) Printed material from the Church states that "The free standing altar was designed to use the frontal ceramic tiles planned and executed by Jean Nison."

The church's website states, "...the current sanctuary was designed by Carleton A. Steiner, [an architect who also designed the First United Methodist Church in Sunnyvale, CA in 1954,]...and dedicated on May 24, 1960. ...Robert Pinart created the stained glass windows representing the biblical themes and Jean Nison designed the ceramic tiles on the altar and baptismal font."⁴³ Also, the use of concrete to frame the glass and tiles helps bind the two art mediums together.

⁴³ http://www.sothb.org/who_we_are/history.php



One of Robert Pinart's stained/slab glass windows. Printed material from the Church states "The four slab-glass windows were especially designed (including the color) and executed by Robert Pinart... . These windows tell the story of the redemption in the Old Testament. [This window] portrays the two tablets of the Ten Commandments of God which Moses delivered to the people of Israel."

The tiles in the church installation seem very similar to those Nison designed for the religious exhibitions at the Museum of American Crafts and the Dallas Museum of Art, and Nison may have obtained the commission as a consequence of this.



“The curious bubbly glazes of Miss Nison's tiles is unique and characteristic and is a result of her study and experimentation to create an effect of other-worldliness and a new effect in the diffusion of light.”. (Printed material from the Church)

The church, however, could not locate any information about how Nison and Pinart obtained their commissions. Nison's sister lived in Berkeley, and she may have had something to do with this commission. (Jean Nison had a close relationship with her sister, Alice Simon, and designed tile murals for her sister's house in Berkeley, according to Pinart.) Another connection to Robert Pinart was that the Rambusch Studios in New York designed the altar appointments. Pinart worked for Rambusch Studios in the early 1950s where his work received critical acclaim.



The Baptismal Font at the Shepherd of the Hills Church. According to printed material supplied by the Shepherd of the Hills Church, "The baptismal font matches the altar with artistic use of concrete and Miss Nison's tiles. Thus the font and altar outwardly signify the inner spiritual relationship between the two sacraments."

Nison discussed the working relationship between ceramic artists and architects. She wrote that tiles "...are especially suited to modern design and the artist is fortunate who can discover the architect who shares his belief in the appropriateness of his colorful product in contemporary building. Given an opportunity to function in such an important way the ceramic artist will...have the satisfaction of placing a really integrated design with the architect... ."44

Robert Pinart said that Nison spent a good deal of time "on the road" trying to sell their work to architects. She would literally knock on architects' doors to talk to them about

⁴⁴ Jean Nison, "Ceramic Tiles", *American Artist*, Vol. 18, No. 6, Summer 1954, p. 85.

her ceramic, and his stained glass, work.⁴⁵ This was essentially the same method she used with interior designers. Pinart also said Jean was a good critic of his work, and helped him with his art. In addition, she unselfishly promoted his work to architects to the detriment of her own work. Pinart gave her credit for bringing him together with the architect Percival Goodman. Pinart and Goodman worked on a number of commissions together.⁴⁶

In September 1960 the American Craft Council reported that Jean Nison would participate in an architectural and crafts exhibit at the American Institute of Architects Convention at Sun Valley, Idaho in October. West coast artist and Director of the ACC Craft Research Service, Sam Richardson, was in charge of the exhibit...⁴⁷ There was nothing in Jean Nison's file in the American Craft Council Library, however, about this exhibit.



Part of the mural designed for Roosevelt Hospital, New York, NY. (Photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library)

Also, at about this time, Nison received a commission to design a tile mural for Roosevelt Hospital in New York City through the offices of Elizabeth Draper, Inc., a high-end interior designer. This mural most certainly no longer exists as the current building at 1000 Tenth Avenue, Manhattan, a "13-story Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designed facility was built in 1990. The original hospital was on the same block but faced Ninth Avenue.

⁴⁵ Telephone conversation, April 30, 2014.

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Mr. Pinart, May 8, 2014.

⁴⁷ "Craft Research Service", *ACC Outlook*, Vol. 1, No. 7, September 1960, p. 3.

Much of the original hospital, including the emergency room, was torn down to make way for two 49-story apartment buildings [on the block].”⁴⁸

We know very little about the life of Jean Nison. She seems to have left almost no record of her early life and upbringing, except what she tells us in her 1953 *Craft Horizons* article, and from a search of public records. Nison wrote that she was born in Egypt and received her early education in France. Her mother was a sculptor, and her maternal grandfather was [Ernest Lawson](#), a landscape painter in the late 19th and first third of the 20th century. Ernest Lawson (1873-1939) painted many landscapes of the Inwood section of Manhattan,⁴⁹ and he was known as one of “The Eight”, painters whose works were rejected by the National Academy of Design and went on to exhibit on their own at the renowned Macbeth Gallery, as well as in the iconic Armory Show of 1913.

In 1961 Jean Nison was a member of the group “Artist-Craftsmen of New York” and either lived in 119 East 28th Street, Manhattan, or had her studio there, or both. Later, she moved to Spring Street in Greenwich Village.

Searching through public records, we find that Jean Nison and her mother Margaret arrived on the *S.S. Roma* from Cannes, France on December 23rd, 1933.

Form No. 1
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
IMMIGRATION SERVICE

Report on this blank United States affidavit and affidavit of insular possessions of the United States arriving at a port of continental United States from a foreign port, a port of foreign, part or a part of the insular possessions of the United States, and such citizens arriving at a port of said insular possessions from a foreign port, a port of continental United States, or a port of another insular possession.

Number **4**
204

LIST OF UNITED STATES CITIZENS
(FOR THE IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES)

S.S. **" R O M A "** sailing from **CANNES** **DECEMBER 12th 1933**, 19, Arriving at Port of **NEW YORK** **DECEMBER 23rd 1933**

No. of Passenger	NAME IN FULL		AGE	Sex	IF NATIVE OF UNITED STATES IN BIRTH OR IF NATIVE OF UNITED STATES GIVE DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH (CITY OR TOWN AND STATE)	IF NATURALIZED, GIVE NAME AND LOCATION OF COURT WHEN ISSUED NATURALIZATION PAPERS, AND DATE OF PAPERS	ADDRESS IN UNITED STATES
	Family Name	Given Name					
1	NISON	Margaret	38	F	Asheville (N. Car.) Sept. 5, 1895.		119 E. 19th St. New York N.Y.
2	NISON	Jean	11	F	March 30, 1922	g. Nison Boy Fashion's 12/1933	same as above.
3	List closed at No. 2.						
4							
5							

Margaret Nison
Parlor

The passenger list also states that Margaret Nison was born in Asheville, North Carolina on September 5, 1895, and Jean was born on March 30, 1922. Margaret’s home address was listed as 119 East 19th Street, New York, New York.⁵⁰ An article in a recent *Our Afghans* about Margaret Nison states, “A sculptor, Margaret’s own story is fascinating and interesting. She was born in Paris, the daughter of one of America’s foremost landscape artists, Ernest A. Lawson. He was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada [in

⁴⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St. Luke%27s-Roosevelt Hospital Center#Mount Sinai Roosevelt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Luke%27s-Roosevelt_Hospital_Center#Mount_Sinai_Roosevelt)

⁴⁹ <http://myinwood.net/artist-ernest-lawson/>

⁵⁰ New York, New York Passenger Lists, 1909, 1925-1957 > vol 11692-11963, Dec 22, 1934 > Image 378 of 847.

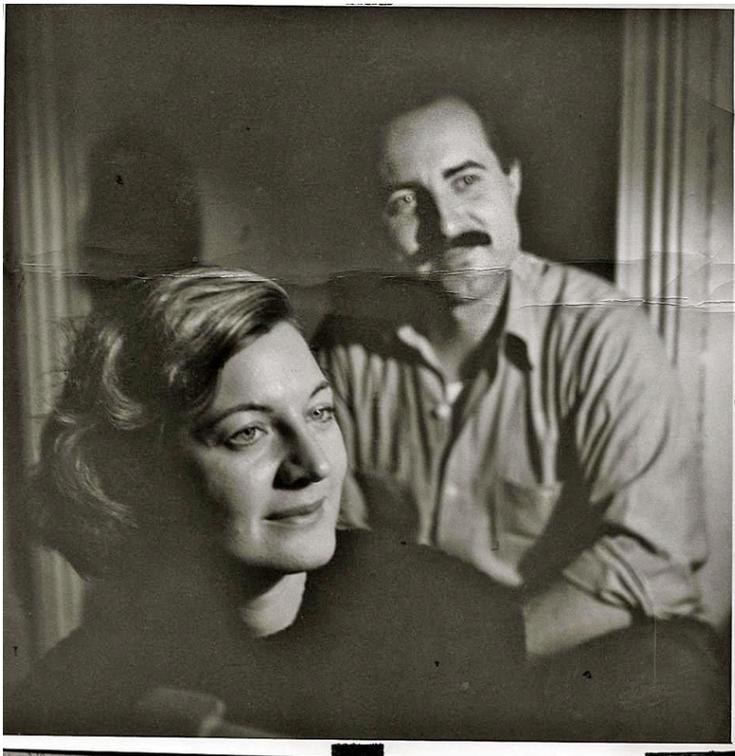
about 1873,] moving to the United States in 1887. He became a member of 'The Eight' a controversial group of eight artists...who, although mounting only one exhibition together (1908), started an entire 'stream' of development in American art. Lawson had earlier married his art teacher Ella Holman. Margaret was born while he was studying in Paris at the Academie Julian... . In 1940, Margaret Nison (by this time a divorcee) was living in Santa Fe, renting a property with her 72 year old mother Ella Lawson. It is almost certain that Nison was living there to enable [her] involvement with 'El Delirio', the retreat for American artists and sculptors set up by the sisters, Amelia and Elizabeth White. [Margaret] continued with her sculpting for the rest of her life. She married again and died as Mrs Margaret Lawson Bensco in April 1989 in Berkeley California where she had lived for many years... . Margaret Nison was resident in New York in 1935, having recently moved there from the country (meaning Connecticut). [...She] started her New Mexico Afghan Hound kennels in the early 1930's[...but] even before we get to New Mexico, we can see that Ms. Nison was significantly active in Connecticut as a breeder, exhibitor. She was also involved with Afghan Hound kennels in Pennsylvania and Ohio... ."51

Margaret tells some of her own history in a 1976 interview for the Archives of American Art. Margaret's first husband and Jean's father, Charles Nison, worked for the International Red Cross, which may explain the reported birth of Jean in Egypt in 1922. Margaret separated from her husband in about 1926-27 and moved to Paris where Jean, and presumably her older sister, Alice, received their early education. In the taped interview Margaret refers to herself as "not making the grade" as a sculptor, but she has high praise for the artistic talents of her daughter, Jean.⁵²

Robert Pinart said that Margaret was an excellent sculptor of animals, an *animalier*, she was able to catch animal movement very realistically.

⁵¹ <http://www.afghanhoundtimes.com/nison.htm>

⁵² "Tape Recorded Interview with Margaret Blasco, Daughter of Painter Ernest Lawson, Berkeley, California, by Paul Karlstrom", Transcript read in the Archives of American Art Library, 300 Park Avenue South, Room 300, New York, NY. (<http://www.aaa.si.edu>)



Jean Nison and Robert Pinart, c. 1956. (Photo courtesy of [Robert Pinart's Facebook page](#).)⁵³

Jean Nison was first married to architectural stained glass artist [Robert Pinart](#) (b. 1927) in 1956, and then to Gordon Cuyler (1908-1983). He was a Lt. Commander in the U.S. Navy in World War II, and, after the war, became the assistant to the head administrative officer of the New York Zoological Society. He retired in 1972.⁵⁴

⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Robert-Pinart/187323068030153>

⁵⁴ "Obituaries", *Town Topics* (Princeton, NJ), Vol. 37, No. 50, February 16, 1983, p. 27.

*Enameled tile by Jean Nison (New York),
6" square, in blue, black, light orange.*



(*Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, May-June 1964, p. 49)

It is apparent that Jean Nison ended her ceramic career in the mid-1960s.. Her last mention in *Craft Horizons* was a photo of one of her tiles in the 1964 May-June issue as part of a compendium of American crafts and craftspersons at that time.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Rose Slivka, "The American Craftsman/1964", *Craft Horizons*, Vol. 24, No. 3, May-June 1964, pp. 10+



A single tile showing an animal shape with gold bubbling.

However, Mr. Pinart told the author that Ms. Nison became involved in other projects--a house she purchased in Portugal, and her house in Greenwich Village being two of them--that took up a great deal of her time.

Fame can be ephemeral--even to innovative ceramic tile makers who were thought to have important contributions to make in the world of design--especially if your largest known creations are attached to buildings that catch fire, or are demolished to make way for a more modern structure. Jean Nison wasn't a prolific architectural ceramist. Her murals were on thin, delicate tiles that might not withstand a salvaging process, and others, such as the "Arts of Daily Living" mural, were not meant to be permanent installations; others may still exist, but were just lost to time. Nison's work, however, did fall into a broad definition of "mid-century modern" design with its organic look, almost abstract animal-like and other design images, and her "bubbling" glaze effects.

I would like to thank the following individuals and institutions that helped with the research for this article: **Brian Kaiser** for his preservation efforts, and for bringing Jean Nison to my attention; the [Tile Heritage Foundation](#) for reporting on the preservation efforts; **Ellen Holdorf**, Registrar, **Samantha De Tillio**, Curatorial Assistant and Collections Committee Manager, and **Ronald Labaco**, Marcia Docter Curator, [Museum of Arts and Design](#), New York, NY; **Richard D. Marshall**, [Art and Exhibition Curator](#), Lever House; **Dr. Richard Sturm**, administrative director of the New York program of New Brunswick Theological Seminary at St. John's University, Queens (ret.); **Simon Glynn**; **Hillary Bober**, Digital Archivist, Dallas Museum of Art, and the [Dallas Museum of Art](#); **Jessica Shaykett**, Librarian, [American Craft Council Library](#); **Pastor Kim Swenson** of the [Shepherd of the Hills](#) Lutheran Church, Berkeley, CA; **Joy Goodwin**, Archives Specialist, [Archives of American Art](#), New York, NY; **Elizabeth Botten**, Reference Services, [Archives of American Art](#), Washington, DC; **Millie Molina**, NYC Housing Authority and **Douglas Dicarolo**, Archivist, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College/The City University of New York, for their help with the LaGuardia Houses competition photo; **Erika Rosenberg**, Archivist at Lippincott; **Jonathan Lippincott**, grandson of J. Gordon Lippincott; **Dalia and Merrill Berman** and **Itai Taubenfeld** for the photos of the Lippincott House; **Mark Liebowitz** of [Wilmark Stained Glass Studios](#), where Robert Pinart created many of his religious stained glass commissions over the years; and especially to **Robert Pinart** for his generous sharing of Nison's history.



(Photo from Jean Nison, "Ceramic Tiles", *American Artist*, Vol. 18, No. 6, Summer 1954, p. 60)