

California Mosaic Tales



David L Hume describes the ceramic mosaic installation at Long Beach Airport

A TURN OF FATE TOOK ME TO THE LONG BEACH AIRPORT AND ITS RECENTLY UNCOVERED FLOOR MOSAICS. I was flying from Los Angeles (LA) to Seattle for a wedding and my partner booked two tickets out of the tiny airport, 25 miles south of LA.

When you first pull up outside of the original building, its Art Deco façade catches the eye. More cinema than airport in styling, its quaintness is a welcome change from the soulless and sprawling steel and glass structures of many international airports. Resplendent in gleaming white and horizontal sky blue detail, it is inviting rather than foreboding and this is reflected



Facing page: *City Crest*. 1941. Floor mosaic, coloured ceramic tiles.
 Top left: *Compass*. 1941. Floor mosaic, ceramic tile.
 Top right: *World Map (Detail)*. 1941. Floor mosaic, coloured ceramic tile.

also in the friendliness of the airport staff. Forget the officious wardens waving you on before you unload your baggage, the quick hugs with relatives who have dropped you off, here one may leisurely alight, if not await the red carpet and adoring fans.

I have previously found it difficult to engage with large scale ceramic mosaics. On viewing the *zillij* of Moroccan architectural decoration I was left overawed, dazzled and confused, my visual sense repelled by the kaleidoscopic onrush of colour and geometric design. Likewise Roman floor mosaics have left me with a sense of archeological wonder rather than artistic merit. Having not grown up in a Latin or Arabic culture, it struck me that the reverence accorded to this artistic medium, at least in my case, was culturally specific, or confined as artefacts of ancient history. My understanding of ceramic mosaic, as an art form, was underdeveloped. On each occasion, however, I marvelled at its capacity to endure and reveal historic patterns and motifs and their importance to different cultures.

It is perhaps my own dedication to the portable arts and crafts of cultural exchange and tourism and the concrete nature of permanent location, as architectural detail, that has thus far restricted my appreciation of ceramic mosaics. This work, however, with its modernist theme, evoked a new appreciation for this ancient application of the ceramic medium. As a petrified rock, enhanced with the colour and patterns of different cultures and historical periods, ceramic art is second to none, fragile in sculptural form, yet as robust as the hardest stone when fired, glazed as set on a solid flat canvas.

It is inside that the building astonishes. As I swung open the weighty, blue and glass door, the first mosaic greeted me. "City of Long Beach, Incorporated 1897" reads the text around the circumference of the logo. More than a minimalist reduced brand logo, this coat of arms is anchored by a red and gold, gladiatorial figure, a book serving as a plinth for an anvil and an attending brown bear fill out the lower section. The gladiator gestures his lance to a white array to be approached along two similarly coloured paths, lined with symbols of industry. The motifs and, in turn, their less than subtle metaphors of guidance (learning, labour and valour) are seamlessly embedded by tiny rectangular tiles in this emblematic work that is certainly of the time it was set down.

As I marvelled at this single work of art, my partner, less interested in such art, but acutely sensitive to my interest, beckoned me onward with a "you should see the rest" kind of smile. We duly checked in, then set about exploring. As with the cinemas and theatres of this style, a returning staircase on either wing of the building took us to the upper level. At the midway point a semi circle starburst is set in harmony with the curving wall, indicating the staircase return. Along a hallway lined with comfortable sofas, a sweep of overlapping shallow arcs transitioning between earth and sky tones, with a sparse constellation, eventuates in a central circular feature. This compass, with minor points marked out by the zodiac signs, I was later to discover, is the evidence of the artist's desire within a clearly commissioned work of public art. The artist, Grace Clements, as well as being married to astrologer Robert De Luce, maintained



Top left: **Industry Motif**. 1941. Floor mosaic, coloured ceramic tiles.
 Top right: **Ship**. 1941. Floor mosaic, coloured ceramic tile.
 Facing page, left: **Ship** (Detail).
 Facing page, right: **Black Tipped Gulls**. 1941.
 Floor mosaic, coloured ceramic tiles.

an enduring interest in the phenomena of the night sky. This work also demonstrates the artist's ability to match the geometric with the figurative and the smooth transition of colour within this demanding medium. Unlike painting, in which the artist trained, the blending of complementary colours, as variously highlighted in discussions of

Matisse's later works, is exacting, requiring a sound understanding of chromatic relationships.

Returning to the ground floor, the check-in traffic had thinned and offered a window of opportunity to admire and document the other works. As one would expect, the symbols of transportation (travel and communication) are to be found across the floor. While they work as individual compositions set against a map of international flight paths, they also present as parts of a unified installation.

At one point, a proud member of the airport staff informed me that they had only recently been rediscovered, having been hidden for years under industrial grade carpet and that every tile was laid individually by hand. I was grateful for the first part of his information and from the second felt that we have come a long way from an era of the hand made, to one where such remnant art and objects are treated with great astonishment.

Clements trained as a painter in New York before settling in LA in the early 1930s. There she quickly established herself at the core of the Post-Surrealism movement that emerged under the leadership of Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg in southern California during the depression years (Karlstrom 1996). The influence of Post-Surrealism, with its incorporation of Neoclassical elements on this distinctly Californian art movement is clear to be seen in this work, if nowhere else than in the city seal that greets the traveller. While the strong outlines, also characteristic of the style, are evident in the *mapa mundi* that sprawls across the entire reception floor.

Commissioned as part of the New Deal Agency Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project in 1941, this work serves both as a marker of a difficult period in the history of the US and the artistic development of the Post-Surrealist movement, as many of those artists involved, such as Clements and Feitelson, seized the opportunity afforded by the New Deal Agency. The subject of this public art brief was travel and communication, the human endeavour to reach out and be part of the world, from the position of a young nation keen to stamp its mark upon the globe.

In keeping with the desire of the Post-Surrealist movement, the content of this work is accessible to the viewer, if not as a whole, given it is a functioning airport, but certainly in seeking to bring the world within reach of traveller. This was indeed a subject matter that Clements, with her



abiding interest in the cosmic and the infinity of space, could easily engage with and while the governmentally commissioned nature of this work, may have constrained her artistic imagination (Dubin 1991), it is clear that her integrity as an artist has been retained in the design and execution of this installation.

There are definite Post-Surrealist elements in the individual compositions that punctuate the world map, the single hand of the operator working the telecommunications switchboard brings to life the whole via the fragment. This allusion is also found in the depiction of a ship, in which the stern gives way to the wheel. Compositionally, in combining exterior with interior or the massive with intimate, this particular work is a reference to the artist's

1935 painting *Reconsideration of Time and Space* (Duncan 2002).

Clements' skill in the depiction of imaginary space is also seen in another segment that assists with flow of the whole. Here a triumvirate of black wing tipped gulls, appearing to rise from a terrestrial sky, confounds one's perspective. Fashioned from tiny rectangular tiles, the detail of their overlapping feathers is remarkably well executed and lends to the three dimensional illusion.

Taken as whole, if that is at all possible, this work offers an insight into the application of art under the guidance of a federal employment and revitalisation program. While that program is often represented through mural examples, the use of the ceramic medium in the laying of murals is rarely highlighted. In addition, this site also serves as a significant representation of the short lived Post-Surrealism movement and one of the artists central to its establishment, as a key stepping stone in the art of Southern California.

REFERENCES

- Caples G, "A Lecture on Surrealism in the New World", *Abandon All Despair Ye Who Enter Here*, The City Lights Booksellers & Publishers Blog, 15 December, 2013, (<http://www.blogcitylights.com/2013/12/15/a-lecture-on-surrealism-in-the-new-world/>).
- Karlstrom, P J, editor, *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900-1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1996 1996. (<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5p30070c/>).
- Dubin, Z. *Art: Such a Deal!: A Long Beach Exhibition and Tour Reassesses the Rich Legacy of WPA Art Program* 7 November 1991 | *The Times Orange County Edition*.
- Duncan, M, "Post Surrealism" (2002). Exhibit Catalogues. Book 7 (http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/artmuseum_cat/7).
- Patrick, A, "LorserFeitelson (1898-1978) Pioneer of Post-Surrealism & Hard Edge Abstraction" (<http://www.sullivangoss.com/lorser%5FFeitelson/>).

David L Hume is an art historian and independent writer with a special interest in ceramic art and cultural tourism. From Tasmania, Australia, he is the author of *Tourism Art and Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism* and writes the blog *A writer with a ceramic fetish* <http://www.davidlhume.com>. All photos by David L Hume. All images are from the ceramic mosaics at the Long Beach Airport.