

A Second Life

Restoring a 57-Year-Old Mural on Santa Catalina Island Was a Labor of Love, Science and Art

BY STEVE HENSON

Richard Thomas Keit gingerly pulled the last rack of cooled ceramic tiles from his kiln, eyed each one carefully and determined that, yes, the glaze colors matched those of the first six firings. The set of 8x8-inch stoneware-quality tile, colored with Keit's own glaze formulas, had cooked for 36 hours, reaching a peak temperature of 1,860 degrees Fahrenheit. Had any glaze crossed a dry resisting line and oozed into another color, the reaction could have released metallic fumes and ruined the color and surface texture of glazes on adjacent tiles. But these looked good, and Keit, 31, was able to box and ship them from his Thousand Oaks studio to Santa Catalina Island, where they would be the final pieces in an elaborate restoration of a huge, 57-year-old mural at the entrance to the historic Casino building in Avalon.

The mural, which greets visitors as they line up to buy theater or ballroom tickets outside the Casino, is 18 feet, 9 inches, by 10 feet and is the centerpiece of nine underwater scenes designed originally by Los Angeles artist John Gabriel Beckman. They were hurriedly painted by five artists under Beckman's direction in the final weeks before the Casino opened on May 29, 1929. The centerpiece is the first to be restored and is part of a gradual renovation of the Casino.

Although most of the forms in the mural are in the bold Art Deco style, the focal point is a mermaid with the flowing, undulating composition of the *art nouveau* period. Before the restoration, years of decay caused by the salty island air eating away at the painted surface of the entrance had transformed Beckman's beautiful mermaid into a grotesque green goddess. When the mural was unveiled again last summer, however, the mermaid seemed to exude an exotic serenity that drew an emotional response from the 400 in attendance, including William Wrigley, president of the Wm. Wrigley Jr. Co., and president of the Santa Catalina Island Co., which owns the Casino. Wrigley's grandfather, William Wrigley Jr., had built the Casino and commissioned the original murals. "The restoration is absolutely everything I expected and perhaps more," Wrigley says.

Beckman, 88, who is still working as an art director, also attended the unveiling. He had designed the murals inside and outside the Casino after completing decorations, murals and the color scheme for Grauman's Chinese Theater during the mid-1920s. "I remembered that we had intended for the exterior murals to be done in Catalina tile," Beckman says. "It would have taken two years. To meet the deadline for the opening of the Casino in '29, we painted the murals

Continued on Page 41

Steve Henson is a Times staff writer.



Anacleto Rapping

Keit beneath the centerpiece of the casino mural, painted in 1929 by artist John Gabriel Beckman and now restored in tile.

Second Life

Continued from Page 25

right on the concrete." The Depression followed, and Beckman moved on to art directing. No effort was made to do the murals in tile until 1984, when Keit heard through associates that Beckman and the Santa Catalina Island Co. had talked about a restoration. Keit phoned Beckman to offer his services.

"He agreed to meet me at the port in San Pedro," Keit recalls, "and said I would recognize him by the red carnation in his lapel." They took an immediate liking to one another. "Richard is a serious student of tile design," Beckman says.

To ensure an authentic restoration, Keit used the *cuerda seca* technique of tile production that had been used by the Catalina Pottery Co. half a century ago. Tile as a highly refined craft achieved great popularity from the turn of the century until about 1930. Catalina tile was especially respected for its bold graphics and rich surface quality, made possible by the *cuerda seca* method of using thickly applied glazes separated by an oily medium. Keit, who already had a small but thriving architectural ceramics business, researched glaze formulas and materials used during the heyday of Catalina tile. "I reached back 50 years to a technique that would have been refined had it not disappeared," Keit says. "I believe I've improved upon it."

Creating tile glazes from scratch out of alumino silicate and various combinations of metallic oxide was as much science as the original line drawing was art. Keit devised and tested about 6,000 glaze formulas to come up with the 163 colors in the 398-tile mural. Meanwhile, Keit sketched the mural on paper at 40% of its actual size from an old two-inch, black-and-white photo that Beckman had provided. The drawing was enlarged to full scale and divided onto 12 silk-screens that were then used to transfer to the tile. After hand-applying the glazes with a bulb syringe, Keit fired 70 tiles at a time in his kiln, which is the size of a large vending machine. Materials cost \$25,000, and Keit and Beckman donated their labor.

The finished product was critiqued carefully by Beckman, whose signature is inscribed above Keit's on the mural. "Richard has done a magnificent job with the Art Deco detailing and with the mermaid," he says. "She was meant to be beautiful, and she had lost her charm. Certainly, there are a few details that I would have done differently, but I think it is a major work of art. It's jewelry, really."

William Wrigley would like to see Beckman and Keit collaborate on the remaining eight outdoor murals. "Over a period of time, yes, I would like to see them all done," he says. "Beckman and Keit really came up with something special." □

SHOPPERS' MART

IS ARMAGEDDON IMMINENT?

A New 184 page book by Bible Scholar Boyd Baker, "HOW TO READ, UNDERSTAND & ENJOY THE BIBLE" will help to answer this and many other questions about living today and in the future. Money back guar. \$10.00 Del. Orders to ARNOLD'S BOOKS, 4828 Burson Way, Oxnard, CA 93030. For each 100 sold, Pub. will donate 5 to V.A. Hosp. or L.A. Library System.

• Custom Fit • Any Normal Size • 5 Year Factory guarantee

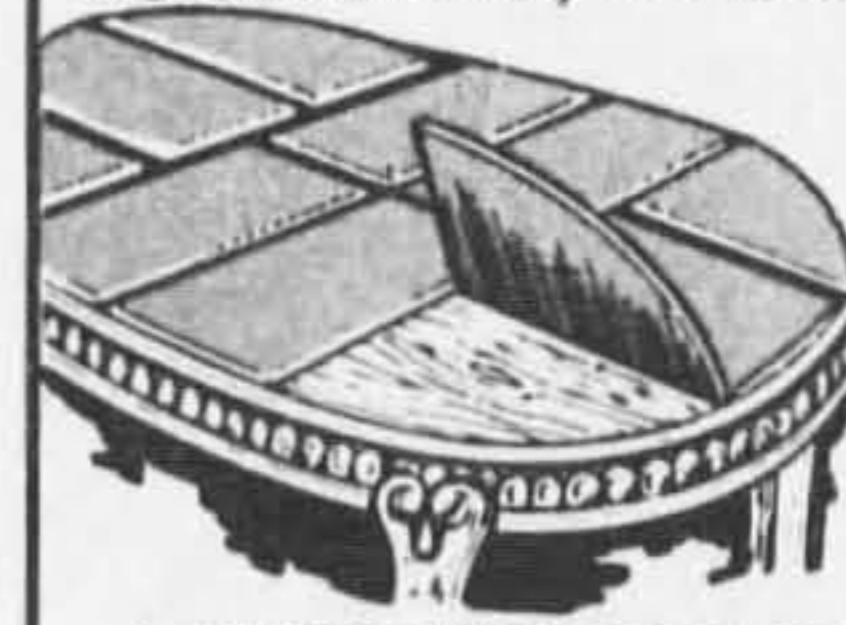


TABLE PADS
50% off

\$49⁹⁵ Reg. \$99.95
By buying direct

Factory Direct Table Pad Co.
Toll Free 1 (800) 428-4567

Look under table and tell us any numbers that may appear

SAVE \$250 ON ANY SIZE \$500 ON DUAL SIZE



BUY FACTORY DIRECT. For total comfort—Electric Adjustable Beds. Get complete details on how to get the most out of sleeping. Send for FREE COLOR BROCHURE. ADJUSTAMATIC BEDS, 907 Hollywood Way, Burbank, CA 91505 L.A. 213/849-3188. Toll Free in California 800/233-7382. Out of California 800/253-2266.

AUDIO-FORUM

offers the best in self-instructional foreign language courses using audio cassettes, featuring those used to train U.S. State Dept. personnel. We have 127 courses in 45 languages, so we must have what you need.

Learn a foreign language on your own! Free Catalog

To get your copy:
Call toll-free: 1-800-243-1234
Audio-Forum, Room K136
Guilford, CT 06437 (203) 453-9794

MADE TO ORDER FOR MAIL-ORDER ADVERTISERS

Use Shoppers Mart to build up your business prospects. This outstanding mail-order vehicle can start things rolling for you by reaching 2.8 million Sunday adult readers. It all adds up to a cost-effective way to tap an audience with more than \$51 billion in purchasing power—and to strengthen your image in a lucrative market. Shoppers Mart—every Sunday in the Los Angeles Times Magazine.

Just 'n Case™

A Travel Potty With Disposable Bags



... Cause Kids Can't Always Wait

- Saves TIME spent searching for restrooms.
- Saves TEMPERs when you can't find one.
- Saves TEARS when you find one too late.

Uses regular lock type plastic storage bags. Contour design allows easy use in/out of cars. Compact for easy storage & take along.

TO ORDER Call Toll Free 1-800-541-0900 (Calif. 1-800-334-3030) MC/Visa/AmEx OR Send check or M.O. for \$24.95 + \$3.50 Ship & Hand. to Kelly & Hee, Inc., P.O. Box 7537, San Jose, California 95150

30 Day Moneyback Guarantee

CA Residents add State Tax Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery
3375 Scott Blvd. Suite 420 Santa Clara, CA 95054



SAVE \$400 ON DUAL KING BED

SLEEPER LOUNGE the ORIGINAL and finest ADJUSTABLE bed since 1950. Check our bed: It has built-in side controls, hand control, super-size 1/5 HP motors, coil box springs and mattress—100% cotton. SLEEPER LOUNGE IS SUPERIOR. For FREE brochure call these stores: LONG BEACH: 3942 Atlantic Ave., 90807 (213) 426-9421; LOS ANGELES: 2302 Barrington, 90064 (213) 477-2081; GARDEN GROVE: 12557 Harbor Blvd., 92640 (714) 639-4142. Established in 1950. Original beds still in use.