

Current Comments®

Fine Art Commissioned for ISI's Caring Center for Children and Parents. Part 1.

Lilli Ann Killen Rosenberg's "A Celebration of Working Parents and Their Children"

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Since ISI® first commissioned Bill Granizo to do a mural,¹ we have become close friends. Bill has a special place in the hearts of many ISI employees who see his work almost every day. When he heard about our plans for the ISI Caring Center for Children and Parents, he contacted Peter Aborn, then ISI's vice president of administrative services, and the person mainly responsible for the design of our office building as well as the Caring Center. Granizo told us about another muralist whose work he considered very exciting.

Thanks to this introduction by a fellow artist, Peter and I became familiar with the work of Lilli Ann Killen Rosenberg. Calvin Lee of ISI arranged for us to meet, and eventually the work to be described was created.

Like ISI itself, I did not originally "plan" the growth of our art "collection." As explained earlier,¹ we commissioned the first mural because it was part of the deal we made with the City of Philadelphia. But the low budget they required made me realize what a small price any organization needs to pay for permanently valuable and stimulating art. And so we embarked on a program that has now proved to be unusual. But I sincerely hope that the inclusion of art in the design of every building will become commonplace.

A few years ago, I described in some detail the numerous works of art at the ISI headquarters building.¹⁻⁴ One of the cumulative effects of the art in our building is to create a cheerful and stimulating work environment for the ISI staff. This

alone might justify the program. But it is interesting to note that the art is equally as stimulating to our visitors. Indeed, corporate art plays an important role in community and public relations.

When we planned the Caring Center,⁵ we were concerned not only with the quality of the environment for the children, but of equal importance was the impact on the community. So we wanted as much *external*, publicly visible art as possible. Aborn, now senior vice president of the Current Awareness Division, and others at ISI consulted many artists in the early design stages of the new facility. They met with architects, child-care consultants, and building contractors to make certain the building's appearance would contribute to a child's sense of security, comfort, and control.

It was our desire that the experiences of the children there be as rich and multidimensional as possible. Anita Olds, Child Study Department, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, feels children have an innate aesthetic sense that needs nurturing.⁶ Art is, therefore, an important aspect of their environment. It can stimulate children to use their imaginations and express their emotions.

The Caring Center now has its own collection of art, perhaps as impressive as that of our main building. Foremost is the spectacular concrete and mosaic bas-relief mural by Lilli Ann which covers the entire exterior west wall of the Caring Center building. Around the perimeter of the playground are four 7' x 13' (2.1 m x 3.9 m) ceramic tile murals created independently by hus-

band-and-wife artists Granizo and Lark Lucas. Granizo, by the way, created the tile mural, "Cathedral of Man," for ISI's headquarters.¹ Also within the Caring Center playground stands a life-size cast bronze puma, created by Philadelphia sculptor Eric Berg. Inside the Caring Center building hangs a large Huichol yarn painting by Emeteria Martinez Rios, who also created the yarn painting, "Myths and Rituals of the Huichol Indians," discussed previously.²

Since it is impossible for a single essay to do justice to all of these unique works of art, we will discuss them in several essays, so that each may be treated in detail, both in text and in accompanying pictorial inserts. This essay, the first in a series, will describe Lilli Ann's mural, "A Celebration of Working Parents and Their Children," which is by far the largest and most visible work in the entire ISI collection. (See color insert elsewhere in this issue.)

Lilli Ann received her professional training in art and architecture at Cooper Union, New York, and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan. As a teenager in Southern California, she discovered Simon Rodia's work, "Watts Tower," a mosaic sculpture in Los Angeles. This work, which consists of seven steel and concrete towers,⁷ made a lasting impression. The use of variegated pieces of tile, pottery, and glass, which Rodia embedded in his sculpture, appealed to Lilli Ann. Such free use of materials, and the tactile qualities they provide, have since become an enduring feature of her own work.

Working with concrete and mosaic, Lilli Ann's technique is to embed a variety of materials into concrete, sometimes carving into the concrete or casting with it. In this form of sculpture, known as bas-relief, the figures project slightly from the background substance. Her use of rich textures and colors discourages graffiti. Since Lilli Ann creates most of her work for the outdoors, her pieces are extremely durable and presumably resistant to environmental damage. However, under extreme tem-

perature fluctuations, small ceramic pieces may fall off. These can be easily recemented.

Lilli Ann's career began in 1950 as a teacher and director of the art program at the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A multi-service social agency serving the residents of the Lower East Side, the Henry Street Settlement also provides cultural and recreational activities for tenants in local housing developments. Lilli Ann felt that art in housing developments would give residents a sense of permanence and belonging, especially if the community participated in the project. Working with children of the LaGuardia Public Housing Development, Lilli Ann placed ceramic murals and sculpture in the community centers. She worked with all age groups in creating concrete play-sculpture gardens adjacent to the housing development. The murals and sculpture, created with Lilli Ann's guidance, helped improve the drab atmosphere and gave each space its own character.

Her work at LaGuardia prompted the Housing Authority to plan similar beautification programs in other housing developments. The Housing Authority established an Art Advisory Council. In 1960, the council received a Rockefeller Foundation grant for improving the appearance of community spaces. Lilli Ann was named art consultant. Her job was to change the institutional atmosphere in the housing developments and to work toward humanizing public spaces with art. She reviewed plans and made suggestions for improving the appearance of all public spaces in New York City housing developments.

Lilli Ann believes that art created by children can be beautiful and deserves recognition. When the Henry Street Settlement decided to build a new headquarters, she persuaded the architect to include a mural made by children. The resulting work, entitled "The Friendly Jungle," adorns the front of the Henry Street building on the Lower East Side. In her 1968 book, *Children Make Murals*

and *Sculpture*, Rosenberg described her mural projects involving children. In it she emphasized the need to provide children with avenues of creative expression.⁸

During her years at the Henry Street Settlement, Lilli Ann functioned more as an art teacher than an artist. She had children create a number of murals under her direction. This gave them a sense of accomplishment and self-respect. In time, however, she felt the need to create art of her own. In 1968, she left the Henry Street Settlement, and began creating outdoor murals. She often invited children and other members of the community to contribute small objects for inclusion in these murals, many of which can still be found in New York playgrounds and housing developments.

In 1972, Lilli Ann moved to Boston with her husband and three children, where she continued to produce murals with the participation of the community. For example, in creating a mural for the Judge Baker Clinic, Children's Hospital, Boston, she involved the young patients and hospital staff. The children contributed their own handmade clay pieces. Lilli Ann then embedded them into the mural. This imparted to the children a sense of control in changing their environment.

Concrete mosaic murals created by Lilli Ann with community participation have also been installed at a number of Massachusetts schools. In Boston's predominantly Hispanic Villa Victoria housing development, she produced a mural that honors Ramón Emeterio Betances, a nineteenth-century Puerto Rican patriot.

Five years ago, Lilli Ann completed her largest piece, "Celebration of the Underground," a 110' x 10' (33 m x 3 m) mosaic for the Park Street Subway Station in Boston. The 128-section mural tells the story of America's first subway, built in Boston in 1897. The mural consists of concrete embedded with old trolley parts, subway construction tools, seashells, rocks, bones, ceramic pieces,

and colored glass. Part of the mural depicts the origin of the subway as Boston grew from a seaport town into an industrial and commercial center. Another part shows tunnels connecting different neighborhoods of the city.

More recently, Lilli Ann created a mural for blind and handicapped children at the Alfred I. du Pont Institute, an orthopedic pediatric hospital in Wilmington, Delaware. This mural depicts a fantasy garden in which animals and children are interspersed with clouds and plants. Like most of her work, this piece incorporates a "please-touch" quality that children find appealing.

Lilli Ann's work has been exhibited at the Kendall Gallery in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, both in New York City. She has about 40 bas-relief and sculpture creations in Boston and New York City. She even has pieces of sculpture installed in front of the public library in Medellín, Colombia. She created these with her husband, Marvin Rosenberg, who is an artist and social worker. Numerous pieces of her work are in private collections.

It is this experience and dedication to children's art that Lilli Ann brought to the Caring Center mural. The 36' by 18' (10.8 m x 5.4 m) mural consists of 72 bas-relief concrete panels that she created in her studio in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. She spent six months creating these panels. Then, with the help of several assistants, she spent four days installing them on the wall of the Caring Center.

The mural can be seen quite clearly from the University City High School located on 36th Street, about 500 yards from the Caring Center. The sun reflects from it and, depending on the angle, it produces a brilliant effect. At night it is clearly visible since it is illuminated by spotlights. My only regret is that this marvelous work is not visible in a more central part of Philadelphia.

"Celebration" depicts four large trees that represent the seasons, their branches filled with an extraordinary variety of

exotic birds. At the base of one tree is the prominent figure of a man standing with a child on his shoulders. This symbolizes the often overlooked importance of the father in childraising. On the ground between the trees is a pond, with a panoply of life within and around it. There are fish, turtles, frogs, cats, dogs, dragonflies, butterflies, and other insects. It is this diversity of life that Lilli Ann celebrates in her mural.

On the left side of the mural, in the background behind the trees, Lilli Ann has created a cityscape of Philadelphia, decorated with objects unique to our city: the Liberty Bell, soft pretzels, boat-racing on the Schuylkill River, and of course Benjamin Franklin performing his famous kite-flying experiment. Many of the clay pieces in this collage were created by friends of Lilli Ann who know and love Philadelphia.

Naturally, the mural is adorned everywhere with children. An infant crawls along the banks of the pond, surrounded by alphabet blocks. One child has snared a leaping fish. Other children frolic among the fallen leaves in the foreground or play with adults in the streets of the cityscape.

One theme Lilli Ann sought to incorporate into the mural is that of growth and change. Thus, the left side of the mural depicts the Big Dipper to represent a starry night sky above the leafless trees of winter. The trees in the center are green with spring and summer foliage. On the right of the mural, an autumn sun bursts through trees with leaves of red and gold. Growth and change are also evident in a succession of three handprints impressed into the concrete. These handprints grow successively larger, showing a progression from infancy to childhood to adulthood. Children at the Caring Center like to fill in the hands with their own, and their interaction with the artwork mirrors Lilli Ann's intent that "play leads to discovery."

Lilli Ann has embedded her mural with thousands of brightly colored objects such as coins, seashells, marbles,

and glass. The arrangement of these objects forms the figures in the mural. The one-to-three-inch-thick concrete surface also employs "real life" artifacts to form images. For example, the shells of the turtles consist of round grills from the tops of gas stoves. Scallop shells form the wings of some of the butterflies. Drafting tools, antique keys, and wrought iron fence sections are also part of the mural. And the leaves, more than 1,500 of them, are clay impressions of real leaves, embedded in the concrete. The entire mural is coated with a special weatherproof glaze similar to the anti-graffiti spray used on brick buildings.

One of the most surprising aspects of this work is that there is so much to be seen. For example, you may at first notice the recognizable form of a cat in a tree. As you move closer you can discern the many component objects that make up the cat: mirror fragments, beads, and mosaic tiles. On closer inspection, you see yourself reflected in the mural's fragments. Indeed, you may appreciate the intricately colored beads for their own beauty. Susan Silverstein, Caring Center director, and other members of her staff often observe toddlers trying to articulate the names of the many objects they find in the mural. "I tried to fill it with lots of different objects," says the artist. "Every time people look at it, I hope they'll see things they never saw before. I didn't want people to get tired of it." I suppose this must be the implicit wish of every artist. To further emphasize her theme of growth and change, Lilli Ann designed the work so that it looks different at different times of the day. She suggests that the best time to see it is after noon on bright days. "The colors and the mosaics catch the sun, and everything glitters," she says. Silverstein notes that some parents have made it a daily ritual to visit the mural, where their children search for different objects and designs.

Lilli Ann designed her work so that very small children can find meaningful objects at the bottom of the mural. As they grow taller, they see the mural from

different perspectives. Olds believes that Lilli Ann's work is ideally suited for children, attuned as it is to the stages of childhood development. According to Olds, before the age of four, children tend not to perceive the whole, but to focus on subpieces.⁶ Lilli Ann's work provides young children with many colorful, small objects to occupy their attention. Moreover, according to Olds, the bas-relief mural allows the child to obtain tactile and kinesthetic information about the structure of its component parts.

Lilli Ann's "Celebration" has been widely praised. Former Philadelphia city planning director, Edmund Bacon, believes that its appeal lies in the familiar objects it contains. "In contrast to more fashionable abstract art," he says, "it gives a much richer evocation to children of the senses and experiences meaningful to them."⁹ Robert Campbell, architecture critic for the *Boston Globe*, suggests that children are not the only ones to appreciate the absence of abstraction. Commenting on Lilli Ann's

work in general, he noted that her art "can be appreciated by a larger public than the few who attend galleries."¹⁰ This is in sharp contrast to the feelings of Albert C. Barnes, who felt that only those who had studied art could adequately appreciate it.¹¹

Through the art at the Caring Center, preschoolers are getting early exposure to a variety of creative folk and fine art. It is important that children identify with the various childhood experiences these artists have portrayed. In future essays, I will discuss the other works at the Caring Center, as well as the new artwork on display in our main offices, which provide parents and toddlers with the kind of daily stimulation that makes life just a little less ordinary.

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A CELEBRATION OF WORKING PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN



A Mural by Lilli Ann Killen Rosenberg for

THE ISI
CARING CENTER
for CHILDREN & PARENTS



Lilli Ann Killen Rosenberg's mural, "A Celebration of Working Parents and Their Children" is installed on the west wall of the ISI/Caring Center for Children and Parents. The 35' x 18' (10.8 m x 5.4 m) bas-relief mural consists of 72 concrete panels embedded with thousands of such brightly colored objects as coins, seashells, marbles, glass, and leaves.

Rosenberg has designed her mural to engage the curiosity of children, and to encourage them to explore objects and themes which they find meaningful. These provide a variety of textures and shapes that appeal to children, who enjoy touching the individual objects. Rosenberg's mural incorporates her feeling that "play leads to discovery". For example, young children can recognize the alphabet blocks in the lower right of the mural, while older children learn from the collage depicting Philadelphia's history and tradition on the left side of the mural.

The theme of the mural is growth and change. The left side depicts the big dipper to represent a starry winter night. Centrally, trees green with spring and summer foliage are filled with a variety of birds. On the right, brightly colored



Handprints of various sizes serve as a template for children at the Caring Center measuring their own growth.

Above, Artist Lilli Ann Killen Rosenberg adds a layer of sealant to the mural to protect it from the elements.



A view of the Delaware River, separating Philadelphia from Camden, New Jersey, forms a part of the Philadelphia collage.



The figure of Benjamin Franklin in part of a collage within the mural depicting the traditions and stability of historical Philadelphia.



Close inspection of the mural reveals "found" objects such as the grills from the top of a gas stove used in turtle shells.

The figure of a man with a child on his shoulders is a prominent part of the mural.



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***"A Celebration of
Working Parents
and Their Children"***

*A bas-relief mural at
the ISI Caring Center.*

*Right, Real leaves are used to form impressions in clay. The
leaves are rolled into a clay matrix and removed. The remaining
clay impression is fired and glazed, and then embedded in the
concrete mural.*

*Below, Full view of "A Celebration of Working Parents
and Their Children" shows a progression from night to day,
winter to fall.*

