

Joyce Kozloff: Suburban Station, Philadelphia

"Galla Placidia in Philadelphia" and "Topkapi Pullman," 1 Penn Center at Suburban Station, Philadelphia, PA, Richard I. Rubin & Co., Developer; Francis, Cauffman, Wilkinson and Pepper, Philadelphia, Architects; fabricated by Trvisanutto Mosaics, Spilimbergo, IT; photos Eugene Mopsik

Two mosaic panels integrate local history with early moments in the history of Western art. In "Galla Placidia in Philadelphia," William Penn stands on a schematic hillside, holding the scrolled charter to the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He functions as an historical referent and schematic visual symbol, for his silhouette is the primary civic icon of the city. Penn is set into an ornate architectural ensemble based on the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. Although the wall surface is only slightly convex, the impression is of a lunette set deeply into one of the arms of a chapel's Greek cross floor plan. Flat, ornamented archivolt outlines this illusionistic space and separate it from a two-dimensional starry night abstracted from the patterned constellations on the ceiling in Ravenna. Penn replaces the Christian saints at Galla Placidia, but the forms of their attributes remain, so he is shielded by the protective canopy of Early Byzantine art, but the flames of martyrdom which encircle his feet are now de-contextualized, retained for their decorative effect.

Opposite the Penn mosaic stands "Topkapi Pullman," paying tribute to Philadelphia's role as a transportation and mercantile center. From inside Istanbul's Topkapi Palace, tiled with elaborate floral and geometric motifs, a doorway opens up onto a massive, foreshortened locomotive speeding through a streamlined Precisionist space. The Art Deco train is modeled on Fix-Masseau's iconic 1929 Orient Express poster. It evokes the romanticism of train travel, and plays on its symbolism in 1930s movies, where it was a metaphor for sex, power and glamour. Above is the logo of the Pennsylvania railroad, and below its motto, "The Standard Railroad of the World." (Regional commuters in the 1930s might have fantasized that they were traveling on the luxurious Orient Express to Istanbul.) Bridging decoration and illusion, the style and imagery acknowledge both fine and applied arts traditions, signifying the artist's intention to break down the barriers between them.

Text excerpted from Pat Johnston, Joyce Kozloff: Visionary Ornament. Boston, MA: Boston University, 1985.