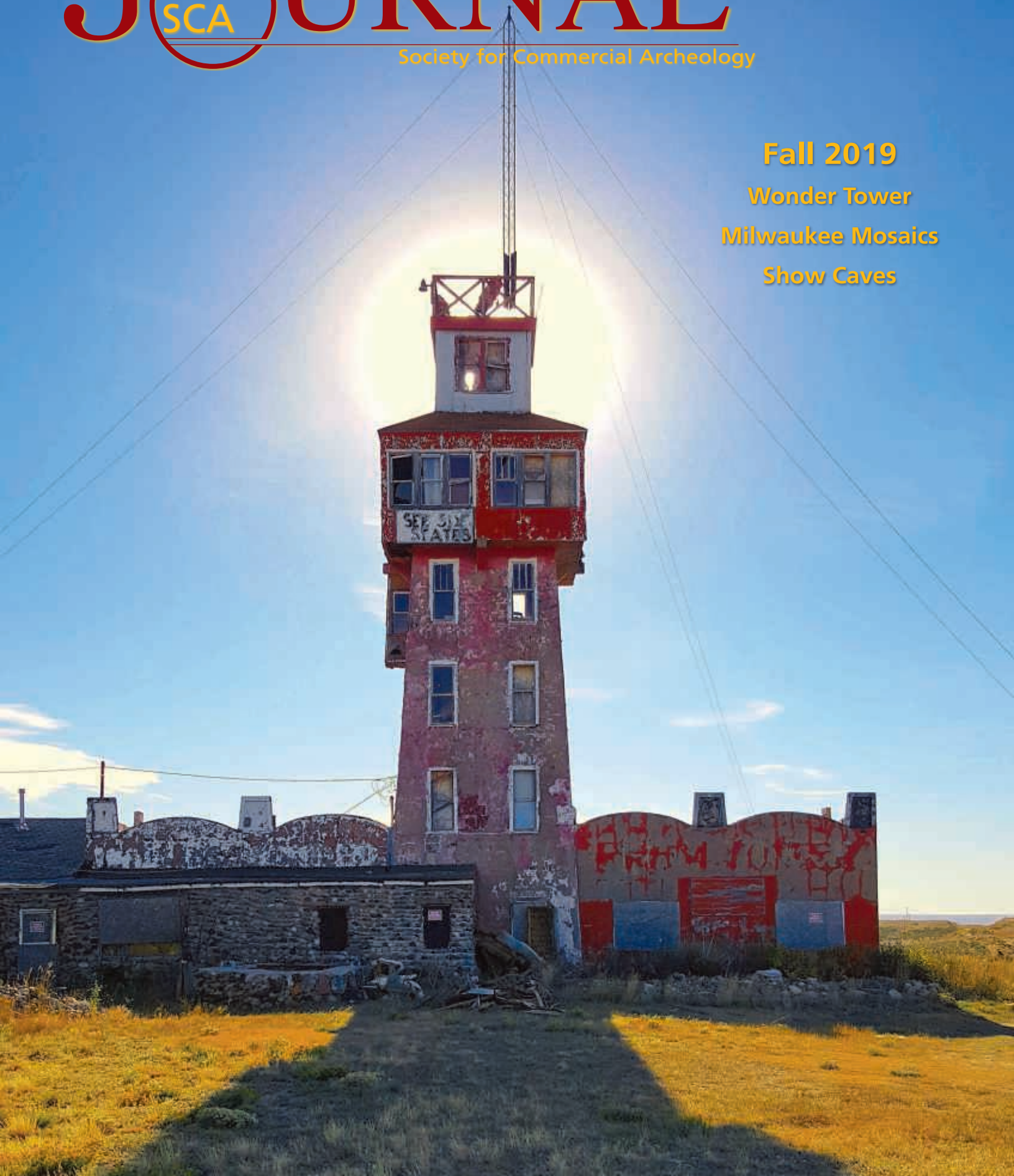


JOURNAL

SCA

Society for Commercial Archeology

Fall 2019
Wonder Tower
Milwaukee Mosaics
Show Caves



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Common Ground

Landscape Mosaics at the Wisconsin State Office Building in Milwaukee

by Lillian Sizemore



MOSAIC is a tradition dating back more than 8,000 years, though, in our modern architectural environment, it often goes unnoticed. Modern mosaic has been virtually left out of art history as an area worthy of study. Professor Marjorie Kreilick-McNab's suite of 10 hand-cut marble and 24-karat gold smalti¹ murals for the Wisconsin State Office Building in Milwaukee offers an opportunity for public education into this enduring art form.²

As Kreilick noted in a lecture about these mosaics, "As mosaicists, we belong to one of the oldest art traditions; a tradition of public patronage. Mosaic adornment intended for a specific architectural setting is an art for use. It has a definite purpose in adding splendor and symbolic significance to public architectures."³

My aim in writing this article is to raise awareness of these unique Wisconsin mosaics, so those future generations may continue to benefit from the state's cultural legacy.

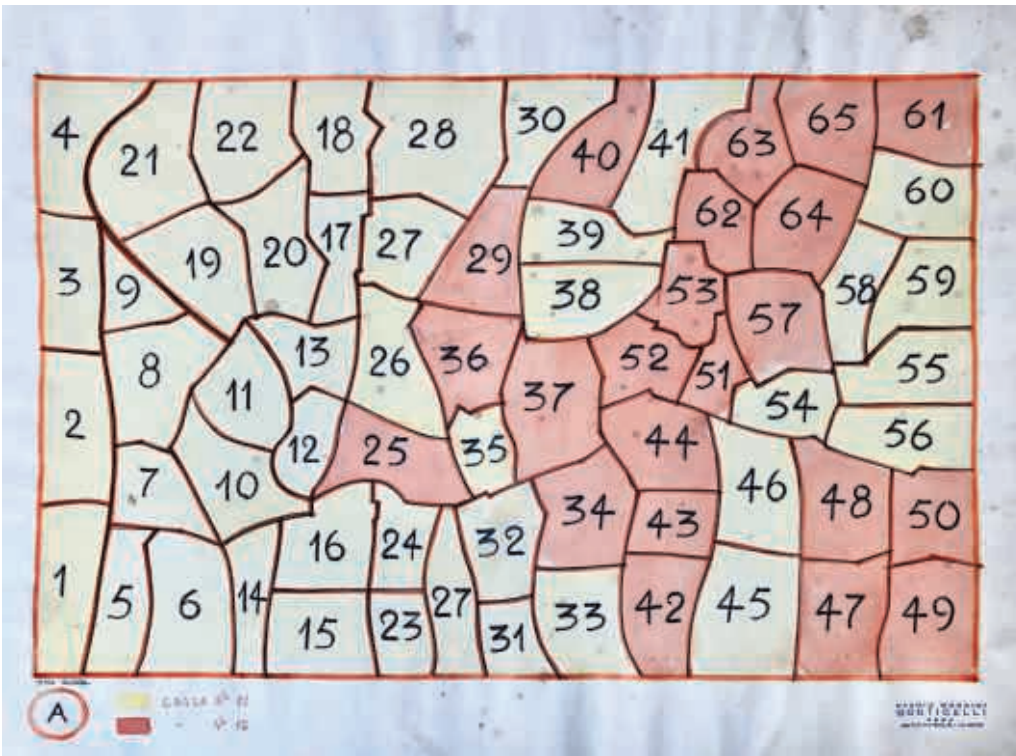


↑ *Coniferous Forest in winter snow with yellow-gold sky*; sixth floor, Milwaukee State Office Building, Wisconsin, 1963. More than 65 kinds of marble came from quarries in Carrara, Italy. Photo © David Erickson, courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.



↑ Milwaukee State Office Building, 1963, currently on the market for sale to private commercial developers. Vintage Postcard © L.L.Cook Co. from an Ektachrome transparency, courtesy Shimon and Lindemann's Wisconsin Project.

➡ Kreilick in her Wisconsin studio cutting marble with traditional mosaic tools, the hammer and hardie, 1960s. Courtesy M. Kreilick, all rights reserved.



➤ The section map for *Burning Prairies* shows how the design was made in smaller pieces, similar to a puzzle, following the natural curves in the design to hide any seams. The color-coding indicates which sections were packed into the numbered crates so they could be identified and installed upon arriving in Milwaukee. Photo by Lillian Sizemore.

⚡ The cartoon for *Burning Prairies* shows scale by indicating a figure drawn at the left edge. Kreilick's painting was used as a guide for the master mosaicists to choose the stone palette, which is suggested in the upper left. Photo by Lillian Sizemore.



An Exciting Discovery & A Timeless Technique

The 1963 State Office Building in downtown Milwaukee features warm and glowing mosaic murals. As I researched Kreilick's archive,⁴ important original preparatory paintings and plans for the ten magnificent mosaics were found. This discovery adds to the scholarship of these incredible midcentury works of art, and are significant to understand how the modern architectural mosaics were commissioned, fabricated, and integrated into the built environment. The small paintings are called a bozzetti or cartoons, and indicate scale and include sample material chosen for each mural. The section maps are color-coded and indicate how the sections were divided up into multiple crates or cassa for shipping. They are stamped with the fabrication studio monogram, Studio Mosaici Monticelli.

The state architect, Karel Yasko, commissioned Kreilick as the lead artist to collaborate with the architects, designers, and construction team on the new Wisconsin State Office

Building. The architectural designers presented tentative plans, and they assigned the industries of beer, wood pulp, and milk as the intended subjects for the murals.

Kreilick, the only woman on the project, listened intently and then stated: "Gentlemen, I'm not interested in that." She felt the imagery of an industrial world was "too unstable a subject matter for the permanence of marble mosaic." She declined the job. Yasko quickly interceded by setting up another meeting at which Kreilick proposed her radically different solution to unanimous approval. Addressing the nine-story plan, she separated the state's geography into nine ecological divisions. The timeless themes address Wisconsin's indigenous landscape "before the red man, the white man, or the establishment of industry."

The nine murals were to be positioned in front of the elevator bays, and are, from the top floor down: the *Cultivated Fields of Maize*, the *River Groves*, the *Burning Prairies*, the *Coniferous Forests*, the *Meadows*, the *Swamps*, the *Lakesides*, the *Deciduous Forests*, and the *Cranberry Bogs*.



↑ Burning Prairies, on the seventh floor, depicts fires set by indigenous people to the prairie grasses, which grew to the height of 10 feet. The burned ash changed the chemical composition of the soil, encouraging new spring vegetation. Photo © David Erickson, courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.

A tenth mural, *Forward*, located at the main entrance, is dedicated to Wisconsin's state motto. This formidable mural has a confident abstract design. Its concave surface accentuates and harmonizes with the vaulted ceilings, bringing scale and definition to the architecture. The strong directional movement conveys the concept of pressing onward, a rhythmic advance.

The mosaics, with their abundant use of gold smalti, add reflectivity to the picture plane; it lifts the surfaces into the ethereal. "There is a quality about it that you can touch," Kreilick says. "For me, it is a live material. It reflects and takes the light. This is something paintings can't do."⁵ In a building meant for use by people from across the state, this link to nature through stone and glass mosaic provides an adaptable, identifiable link to the architecture.



↑ Stone and 'ondulata' gold smalti samples chosen for each mural palette to match Kreilick's paintings. This work shows a rich dark palette for the *Swamps* mural. Photo by Lillian Sizemore.

From Rome to Wisconsin

The murals, measuring 15 feet wide by 10 feet tall,⁶ were created in Italy during Kreilick's two-year fellowship at the American Academy of Rome. She was one of the first women to receive this honor in 1961. Under Kreilick's close art direction and guidance, the Monticelli Mosaic Studio in Rome interpreted her paintings to create the 10 Roman-style marble mosaic murals.

Kreilick had studied classical mosaic and worked as an apprentice at the Monticelli Studio for a year beginning in 1956. She became an expert on cutting and identifying the stone. The subtle marble colors for the tesserae⁷ were hand-selected from veins in the quarries at Carrara in Tuscany, carefully chosen to enliven the subject matter and surfaces.

The mosaic was produced in what is known as the reverse, or face-mount technique. The original design is scaled-up to size, then transferred in reverse onto a brown paper and divided into workable sections that follow along the natural curves of the design. The cut stone is glued face down onto the design and is "back-cut" to more easily receive the mortar. The sections are laid on the floor to check that the edges meet up seamlessly. The completed sections weighed 7,000 pounds and were packed into 14 crates to be shipped down the St. Lawrence Seaway, to the port of Milwaukee.

At the building site, each section was lifted and pressed onto the wall's prepared mortar. Then the paper was dampened and lifted away, cleaned of any remaining mortar, to reveal the beautiful face of the stone and gold smalti. The installation took six weeks with Kreilick and her "mud man" working long days.

A Life Dedicated to Education

Kreilick, who was born on November 8, 1925, was certainly not the only female working in architectural mosaic during the early to mid-20th century, though she was something of a rarity, especially in the Midwest. Her interest in art, nature, geology, and stone emerged from a love of the Great Lakes landscape. Kreilick has an impressive lifelong career in art-making, teaching, exhibition, and service. Her other commissioned architectural works include the Mayo



➤ Kreilick worked closely to ensure her vision with the mosaic masters and even cut stone herself at the Monticelli Mosaic Studios in Rome. Courtesy M. Kreilick, all rights reserved.

⚡ Kreilick, pointing, oversees the mosaic process, as they lay out the sections of the mural on the floor to view progress at the Monticelli Mosaic Studios in Rome. It took two years to complete the mosaic fabrication for the 10 works. Courtesy M. Kreilick, all rights reserved.



Clinic in Rochester, Minn.; Telfair Academy of Arts in Savannah, Ga.; Augustana College in Sioux Falls, S.D.; and First National Bank Building in Chicago. Smaller works for private collectors included a 1975 commission for Samuel Johnson, of S.C. Johnson & Son in Racine, in which she worked with Wisconsin marble from his local quarry.

Her pursuit of higher education began at age 18 in 1943. She left the northern Ohio village of Oak Harbor to pursue a Bachelor's degree, followed by a Master's degree from Ohio State University in Columbus.⁸ In 1952, she was awarded a Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in sculpture from the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art, near Detroit, Michigan. The Academy is widely known as the "cradle of American Modernism"⁹ through noted faculty and alumni, which include the Saarinens, Ray and Charles Eames, Florence Knoll, Jack Lenor Larsen, and Harry Bertoia.

With this pedigree, Kreilick took a job with the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1953 and was only the second woman to hold a faculty position in the Art

Department. Throughout her career, Kreilick remained a practicing and exhibiting artist, working on her mosaic commissions during sabbaticals and the summers until the mid-1970s. She taught in the department for 41 years. Her original color and theory courses became essential components of the art and design curricula and were required for environment, textiles, and graphics majors. She retired in 1991 as a distinguished professor emerita.

Modern Mosaic for the People

The Greeks and Romans employed mosaic pavement designs to engage storytelling and conversation from the public bathhouses to the senators' villas. The glittering gold domes of Byzantium proclaim the stories of a new Christianity. In the early to mid-20th-century, the mosaic was, once again, used for the benefit of civil society. A reunion of art and architecture, mosaic offered its durability, functionality, and brilliance to broadcast the optimism of the era.



† The bozzetto, or painting for *Lakesides* mosaic, on the third floor shows a silvery watery light reflecting off the dunes. Marble selections include soft pink stones used for the sandy shores. Photo © Lillian Sizemore.



← *River Groves*, on the eighth floor, depicts the silver-barked birch forests of northern Wisconsin that provided impermeable wood for the native people for making canoes, cups, and baskets. Photo © David Erickson, courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.

Mosaic muralism broke away from strictly ecclesiastical use, to be widely integrated into federal buildings, public schools, police stations, community centers, banks, shopping malls, airports, monuments, and prominent corporate office buildings. Applied arts in the built environment was expanded through examples set by the Bauhaus in Europe, the Mexican muralism movement, and the Federal Arts Program of the 1930s.

In post-World War II America, mosaic became more widespread due to open trade agreements with Italy, establishing access to Venetian glass and smalti imports. Italian immigrants created a mosaic and terrazzo workers union, providing U.S.-based master artisans who were skilled at large-scale fabrications. Art professors took sabbaticals in Europe to gain further knowledge, visiting glass foundries and mosaic studios. This groundwork established mosaic art, along with wood, ceramic, metal enamel, and textile,¹⁰ as an aesthetic toolbox for modern architectural decoration.

In Milwaukee, the renowned Finnish architects, Eliel and Eero Saarinen, commissioned a significant mosaic façade by Precisionist artist and educator, Edmund Lewandowski, for their controversial Brutalist structure. The War Memorial Center, located in downtown Milwaukee, was completed only a year before state architect Yasko began the construction of his modern cast-concrete office building.

A Climate Change

The State Office Building murals are important historical artifacts and an intimate record of Wisconsin’s visual culture. They belong to the citizens of the state. It is rare in the U.S. to find modernist murals of this quality and richness of material. These prominent artworks deserve landmark designation and historic preservation. The subject of conservation remains an open question as the state lawmakers consider options to sell or raze the current office building, which is perceived as “dated and inefficient.”¹¹ The state budget committee has a bill to build an entirely new facility, with an estimated cost of \$98.5 million. If the current building is sold to private investors, the public could potentially lose access to its valuable art.

The decision to use the “permanence of marble mosaic” to depict the state’s ecology rather than the shifting climate of industry has proven prescient. The murals reach deep into the public consciousness to transcend political concerns as they connect us to a common ground: our precious natural resources. If Kreilick’s public artwork is to endure our proclivity for “endless improvement, short attention spans, and fickle tastes,”¹² the public must demonstrate they are ready to safeguard the past and take action for their future. Forward! ●



Lillian Sizemore is an independent researcher and mosaic artist who has worked in the field for more than 25 years. She studied at Indiana University, University of Bologna, Italy, and The Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts in London. Her articles have been published in *RawVision*, *Andamento Journal*, *SCA Journal*, *Mosaïque*, and *Mosaic Art NOW*. Her current research focuses on the legacies of the 20th-century mosaic movement.

¹ Smalti (the plural of smalto) are specialized mosaic pieces (tesserae) made from richly colored glass. Initially developed for Byzantine mosaics, the glass contains metal oxides which produce an extensive range of color possibilities. The molten glass is poured into flat slabs which are then broken into individual smalti with rough, irregular surfaces, pitted with air-holes. A layer of gold leaf can be embedded in smalti to produce gold tesserae.

² Located at 819 N. 6th St. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, <https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/AboutDOA/Milwaukee-State-Office-Building.aspx>. (Accessed Feb. 24, 2018) See also: www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Property/HI111444.

³ MKM Archives, lecture: "Mosaic Murals of the Wisconsin State Office Building."

⁴ Sizemore writes and presents on this forgotten legacy. See "No Dames: Marjorie Kreilick's Mosaic Murals in Milwaukee" British Association for Modern Mosaic, *Andamento Journal*, Vol. 12, 2018

⁵ Mary Louise Schumacher, "State Office Building murals by pioneering feminist artist in jeopardy," April 10, 2018. www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2018/04/10/state-office-building-murals-pioneering-artist-jeopardy/492755002/

⁶ Forward's concave curved face measures 19' 6" x 7' 7", plus a mosaic area around the wall and planter base. The nine elevator murals are 15' 2" x 9' 8".

⁷ Tesserae (tess-er-ay) comes from the Greek word for square cubes. The plural of "tessera," they are the individual pieces that make up a mosaic. Originally tesserae were the cubes of stone used in ancient classical mosaics, but now the term is used for pieces of any mosaic material.

⁸ MKM was awarded a B.A., 1943-46, and the M.A. 1946-47

⁹ <https://cranbrookart.edu/about/history/>

¹⁰ See John Smith, "Mosaic Update," Lillian Sizemore, "More of Miss Marble's Mosaic Mysteries," *SCA Journal*, Fall 2016.

¹¹ Lee Bergquist, "Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker announces plans for a new state office building in downtown Milwaukee," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 9, 2018, at www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2018/02/09/scott-walker-announce-plans-new-state-office-building-downtown-milwaukee/323414002/

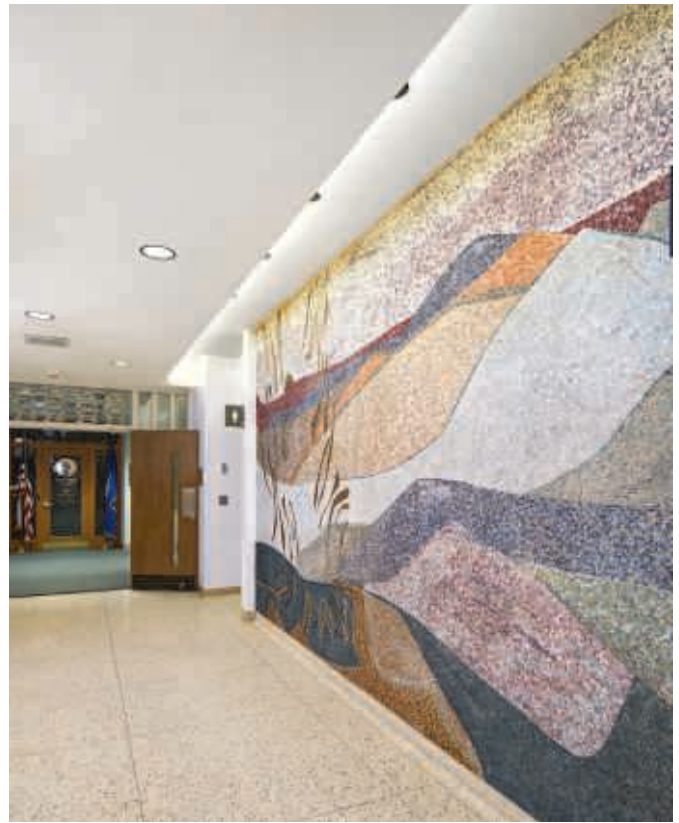
¹² What Happens When Site-Specific Art Outlasts Its Surroundings? Zoë Lescaze, May 13, 2019, at www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/t-magazine/site-specific-art.html.



↑ Kreilick poses at *Forward*, a concave abstract mosaic in honor of the State's motto, in 2017. The work is in the main lobby of the Milwaukee State Office Building. Photo © Lillian Sizemore.

➤ The Milwaukee County War Memorial Center, designed by Eero Saarinen, with the mosaic façade by Edmund D. Lewandowski. The building was dedicated in 1957, and the mosaic installed in 1959. The abstracted layered Roman numerals represent the dates of World War II and the Korean wars. Photo © David Erickson, EricksonStudio.net.

➤ Meadow flowers in the sunshine depict wild meadows before much of it became a pasture for cows. The mosaic has glinting gold smalti as sunshine over the rolling hills; the foreground imagines the dark loamy soils. The work is on the fifth floor, which houses the Governor's office. The entry shows the original decorative screens above the doorway with original wood and glass doors. Photo © David Erickson, courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.



⚡ MAIZE, originally titled Cultivated Fields, is located on the ninth floor. The crisp shapes of the corn reflect the history of agriculture and the taming of wild nature. Indigenous peoples in Southern Mexico first domesticated corn and Wisconsin is currently one of the top corn-producing states. Reflective gold smalti lights up the tassels of the corn plants.

