

In Search of... H. Kahn

by Helen B. Henderson

For many years, the only art tiles associated with Matawan, a small town in central New Jersey, were 6.5-inch, octagonal cloisonné hot plates bearing the marking "Matawan Tile Co. Pro-Cer." The name Harry Kahn surfaced in connection with the local art tiles but the information was contradictory and confusing. In the spring of 1994 while reviewing an old newspaper, a local researcher noticed an advertisement for a firm called "Tile Products Co." Among the wares listed in the advertisement were clay novelties, trim strips, and "Art Tiles by Harikahn." The play on words was noted and a search ensued with the mysteries surrounding the local tile industry more obscure than ever. Over the course of a year, the amount of information known about Harry Kahn, his career and his firm, was greatly expanded.

Records of the Matawan Tile Company are scarce; those for the Tile Products Co. are non-existent. Using oral histories and a few annotations in the local newspaper, part of the mystery of Harry Kahn was pieced together. It appears the firm operated from 1928 to 1941. The principals in the firm were Harry J. Kahn, whose name was used for the product line, and his wife, Hannah Morris Kahn. Both were accomplished designers and ceramicists.

Too many similarities existed between the Matawan Tile Co. Pro-Cer hot plates and the cloisonné tiles bearing the markings of several other companies including the Architectural Tiling Company of Keyport, New Jersey, and the Wheeling Tile Company of Wheeling, West Virginia, for coincidence to be the explanation. A more reasonable cause was the movement from firm to firm of one or more people who influenced production at the different companies. That influence was Harry Joseph Kahn. Born in New York City on Christmas Day, 1898, Harry Kahn for most of his career was a member of a small select group of ceramic engineers. Although relatively unknown today outside of the tile industry, his contributions to the industry are just now becoming known to collectors and historians.

A 1920 recipient of a Bachelor of Science degree in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Kahn was also associated with the ceramics program of the then Rutgers College in New Jersey. The first acknowledgment of his professional career in the ceramic tile industry was as associate director of the research department of the American Encaustic Tiling Company, Zanesville, Ohio. In 1923, Kahn was a ceramicist with the Wheeling Tile Co. as well as a half-owner of Progressive Ceramics also of Wheeling. The name Progressive Ceramics reappears a few years later in association with the Matawan Tile Company. Due to the similarity in names, it is probable that the marking "Pro-Cer" on the tiles made by the Progressive Art Tile Division of the Matawan Tile Co. indicates when Kahn joined Matawan Tile as vice president in charge of the art tile operations. He may have continued to use the name of his previous company.

Around 1928, Kahn formed his own company, Tile Products Co., for the purpose of decorating tiles. Identification of items from this period of time is difficult in that no catalogs are known to exist. An additional difficulty is that the blank tiles were purchased from other companies that already had their names embossed on the back, thus providing misleading information. One tile has been identified as being sold by the company because of its provenance. Discovered in 1994, the tile was still in the possession of the artist who decorated it. A few other designs have also been identified by one of the decorators at the firm as "Art Tiles by Harikahn," including a series featuring the letters of the alphabet. To date the only sources for Kahn designs that have been found, other than from personal identifications, are several designs pictured in *A Handbook of Ornament* by Franz Sales Meyer, including the old German letters used in the alphabet series. A copy of *A Handbook of Ornament* bearing Kahn's signature in the front was originally part of Harry Kahn's personal library.



Harry Joseph Kahn (1898-1963). Photo taken during military service, World War II.

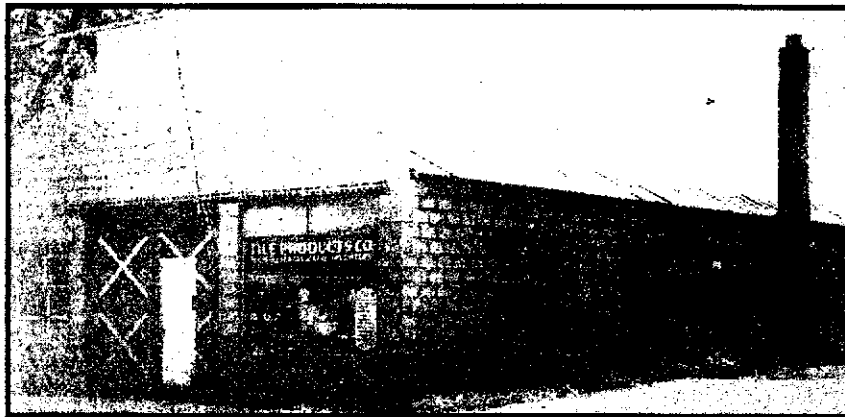
Courtesy of John Kahn.



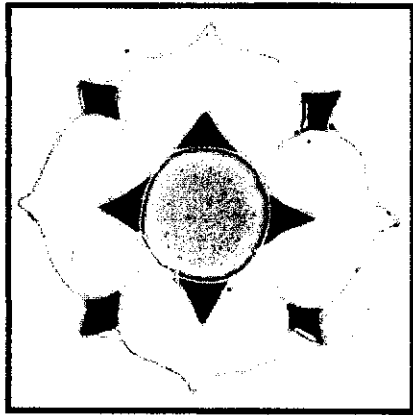
Hannah Morris Kahn, circa 1940. Professional portfolio photo used in the *Matawan Journal*, June 27, 1940, for the promotion of "Legion Follies," at which Mrs. Kahn was one of three featured soloists.



Advertisement from the *Matawan Journal*, October 17, 1940.



Tile Products Company building on lower Main Street, Matawan, New Jersey, in 1936. The company originally started a few doors down on the other side of the street.



A tile by "Harikahn" decorated by Sarah Ellison.

Photo courtesy of Sarah Ellison.



Sarah Ellison, decorator at the Tile Products Company, 1938 to 1941. Photo, circa 1941.

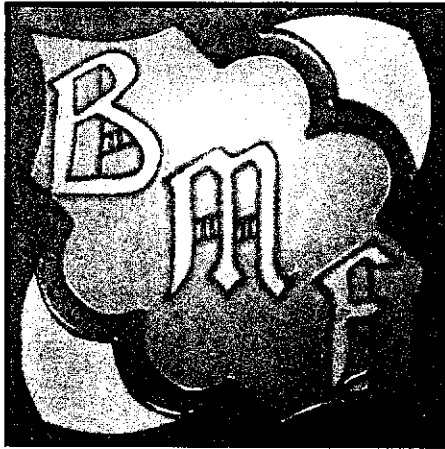
Photo courtesy of Sarah Ellison.

Using tile designs and glazes from the Progressive Art Tile Division as a guide, and knowing the companies in the area from which Kahn might have purchased his blanks, a number of specific tiles have been attributed to the Tile Products Company. In addition to the designs shared between Matawan Tile and the Tile Products Company, there were some designs unique to the "Art Tile by Harikahn" product line. According to Sarah Ellison, former decorator at the Tile Products Co., fish designs were popular, especially to decorate indoor swimming areas. The company also produced silk-screened tiles for use as station markers in the New York City subway system.

Only two advertisements are known to exist for the firm neither of which shows any of the products. One was printed in the September 10, 1936 issue of the *Matawan Journal* and the other in the October 17, 1940 issue of the *Keyport Weekly*. However, the ad in the *Matawan Journal* does depict the low, one-story building from which the company operated. Kahn originally operated out of a two-story house on lower Main Street near the Matawan Tile Co. Kahn had

an office upstairs, while the decorating and painting was done downstairs in two huge rooms. Production was later moved to the building shown in the ad. The factory building was a one-story concrete block structure heated by several kerosene stoves. According to John M. Kahn, "About the time that my father [Harry Kahn] decided to enlist in the Army, the chemical warfare branch, he purchased a building on Atlantic Avenue." The family moved to the building which was a private home that had been converted to a storefront. Attached at the rear was a long barnlike building. The kiln from the Main Street shop was dismantled and reassembled in an addition at the rear of the building.

After World War II erupted, Kahn closed down his decorating studio and entered the military service. The November 14, 1945 issue of the *Matawan Journal* carried a brief mention of Kahn. The paper stated: "Captain Harry J. Kahn of Matawan is now in charge of production control of the ceramic industry in Bavaria." Assigned to the headquarters area located in Munich, Kahn was in charge of 90% of the post-war ceramic industry of Germany. However the local



Cloisonné tile hot plate decorated by Hannah Kahn and presented to her sister-in-law, Bert Marion Feinberg.

Photo courtesy of William Feinberg.



Leaf-shaped plate decorated by Hannah Kahn at the Architectural Tiling Company during WW II.

Photo courtesy of John M. Kahn.

paper doesn't describe the importance or responsibilities of Kahn's position. Kahn's assignment was to return the damaged production facilities to a functioning state so that the Germans could manufacture much of what they needed to restore bombed residences and factories. Restoring damaged buildings, arranging for equipment and resources including the scarce resource of fuel, and finding competent and eligible managers for the plants were Kahn's responsibilities. One of the "side efforts" of the position was the creation of dinnerware sets for high-ranking military staff including General Eisenhower.

After leaving the service, Kahn returned to Matawan for a few years. Although the studio was never fully operational again, one of its products, White Rock Cement, a special adhesive created by Kahn for use with ceramics, was still manufactured and sold. In the early 1950s, the Kahns moved to Massachusetts where Harry became the plant superintendent for the Stylon Corporation in Milford, Massachusetts. Among the items in the Al Davidson Collection at the Tile Heritage Foundation [see "Flash Point" 8-1:10] is a copy of a report written by Kahn on the "Development of Glazes for One-Fire Talc Tiles."

However, working in the Ohio, Massachusetts, West Virginia, and central New Jersey tile industries, and managing the Bavarian china industry are not Harry Kahn's only contributions to the field. After his retirement, Kahn had one last contribution to make to his chosen field of endeavor. As part of the Executive Service Corps, Kahn was sent overseas to provide technical expertise to the tile industries of a number of developing countries including Iran, Greece, Thailand and the Philippines. With competition from imports given as one of the major reasons for the decline in the industry in this country, Kahn, by helping these countries improve their products and processes, was unfortunately helping the decline of an industry to which he had devoted a lifetime of interest.

Harry Kahn was not the only "H. Kahn" associated with the central New Jersey tile manufacturing industry. Using a research technique that is rapidly gaining in popularity, that of requesting information by placing notices in local, regional, and collectors' publications, the name of Harry Kahn's wife was uncovered. Prior to an interview with a family member in Massachusetts, she was known simply as Mrs. Harry Kahn. Although she was a noted soloist who sang at both church and civic functions, the local papers referred to her



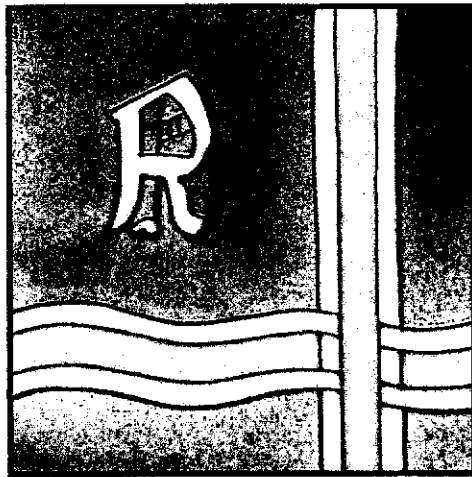
Silk-screened tiles used in the New York City subway system. Using stencils that he created himself, Kahn would silk-screen the desired letters and numbers on individual tiles which were then installed in the subways to spell out the stations' names. These tiles were arranged to spell "USA."

Photo courtesy of John M. Kahn.



"Maid of Winter," decorated by Hannah Kahn, signed "COLL."

Courtesy of John M. Kahn.



Alphabet design produced by the Tile Products Company. Designs featuring the letters "E" and "R" have been found, although other letters were said to have been made in the series as well. The lettering is based on an old German design which appeared in *A Handbook of Ornament* by Franz Sales Meyer, professor at the School of Applied Art, Karlsruhe, and published by the Architectural Book Publishing Co. Inc. of New York City.



Framed decorative item made by Harry Kahn. Samples of these have been found made with bisque from the C. Pardee Works, Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

Photo courtesy of John M. Kahn.



Part of the “Art Tile by Harikahn” product line were framed, decal-decorated tiles. These tiles, decorated on bisque from the C. Pardee Works, Perth Amboy, New Jersey, were removed from their frames for restoration.

Photo courtesy of Marjorie K. Sagurton.

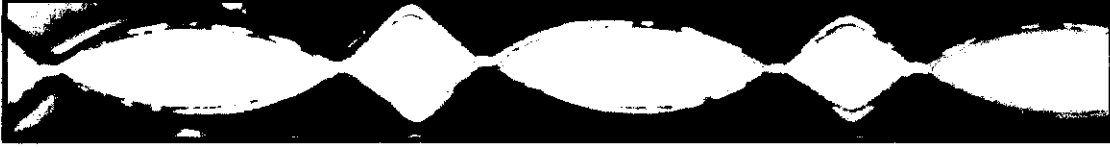


only by her husband’s name, as was standard during the 1930s and 40s. She had no name identity of her own. Even the program for a Memorial Day celebration she sang at, which listed all of the participants including the chorale director, as well as state and national elected officials, referred to her as Mrs. Harry J. Kahn. Now, thanks to her family members, Hannah Morris Kahn has her own identity established in the ceramic tile industry.

Among the clay specialties advertised by the Tile Products Co. were cloisonné panels, borders, inserts, strips, hot plates, framed tiles, and ash trays. Blank tiles in the bisque state were purchased from other tile manufacturers in the area such as the C. Pardee Works of Perth Amboy or the Architectural Tiling Co. (ATCO) of Keyport. The tiles were then decorated by young women with artistic talent who used templates created by Harry or Hannah Kahn or glazed commercially imprinted tiles. Among the women who worked as decorators at the firm were Lolita Francy Ward, Francis Gillis Thaler and Sarah Ellison. Ms. Ward, who was the daughter of the superintendent of Matawan Tile Co., worked for the firm in 1928 when she was 14. Ellison, who worked there from 1936 to 1941, later continued in the art field by teaching in the local schools. While working with Harry Kahn, Ellison was also trained to assist him in operating the kiln. She would walk to the studio from her nearby home at 18 Main Street to check the status of the kiln. The kiln would be started in the morning and she



As did the C. Pardee Works of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Harry Kahn imported decorative tiles from Holland. Some of these are stamped on the back: “Made in Holland.”



One of the trim tiles produced at the Tile Products Company. Piece is 6-inches long by 1/2-inch wide. The design was drawn freehand using a clay slip and glaze was then applied between the lines. This was one of the first items produced by Harry Kahn.

would check it every so many hours until it was shut off about 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening.

Hannah Kahn was an accomplished ceramic artist; she created some of the designs that were executed by the other decorators. Although not all of the tiles she decorated are signed, two bearing the signatures "COLL" and "MARGO" were decorated by her. Hannah also decorated tiles as presents for the family. During World War II, many plants retooled and provided alternative ceramic products in support of the war effort. The Architectural Tiling Company, for example, retooled to produce ceramic dishes, statues, and hand-dipped vases and lamp bases. While she worked there, Hannah Kahn organized and managed the decorating department for pottery, figurines

and artware. A number of leaf-shaped plates from that time are still in the hands of members of the Kahn family and other former employees of ATCO.

Whether the "H. Kahn" stands for Harry or Hannah, both contributed to the history and beauty of the ceramic tile industry. The search for personal information on the couple and the Tile Products Company has yielded much information due in large part to the members of the Kahn family. However, more work remains researching this and other aspects of the New Jersey tile industry.

Special appreciation goes out to Mr. and Mrs. John M. Kahn, William Feinberg and Richard Feinberg, without whose special memories of Harry and Hannah Kahn this article would not have been possible. Also to Sarah Ellison and Lolita Francy Ward for their assistance with this research.

About the author: A former museum director, Helen Henderson is now a free-lance writer of feature articles on antiques and topics of local history. She is currently researching the New Jersey tile industry and collects tiles from the various companies in the central New Jersey area.