

FAMILY STATEMENT: THE NIVOLA MURALS AT THE HURLEY BUILDING,

Costantino Nivola was an Italian-born artist well known for his work with renowned modernist architects during his long career in the United States. In 1939, like many artists and intellectuals fleeing Fascism, he emigrated and settled in New York. Working at first as an art director for several magazines, including *Interiors*, he came in contact with the leading architects of the day. Turning to sculpture, he developed techniques suited to large architectural projects. Sgraffito he had learned in his family trade as a mason, the other two he invented: sandcasting in 1949 while playing with his children on the beaches of Long Island; and the carving of setting-concrete used, for example, in his collaboration with Eero Saarinen for Yale's Morse and Stiles dormitories where the sculptures emerge organically from the material of the walls themselves.

Nivola thought a great deal about public art and took seriously the responsibility of the artist to the public who came in contact with his work. In his own words, he believed, "a work in a public place is a civic act...an ethical [act], it has to do with how we live together, how we affect each other... the work itself should create an atmosphere, a quality that goes above the ego of the individual artist" The techniques he developed were affordable and easy to integrate into construction plans, and this was his *intention* - an attempt to return public art to the "old days," as he put it, "when the sculptor and the stone maker worked next to each other with the same tools, the same materials, and for the same purpose." His commitment to public art as a service, not a showcase for his own work, made him highly valued among architects, many of whom worked with him time and again.

Nivola's first large-scale sandcast mural provided a key design element in the acclaimed Olivetti showroom that opened on New York's 5th Avenue in 1954. Almost two decades later, when the showroom was dismantled, Nivola arranged that the panels be donated to Josep Lluís Sert's Science Center, then under construction at Harvard. The mural has been on prominent display there ever since. Nivola executed two additional sandcast murals for Harvard, one at the International Legal Studies Building in 1958, the other at Quincy house in 1959. Nivola went on to create some two dozen sandcast murals (see attached list) for buildings throughout the United States, the largest being a 110 foot long facade for the Hartford Mutual Insurance Company in Connecticut.

Hurley Building Lobby murals

The two sgraffito murals in the Hurley building in Boston - now in danger of being lost - are the largest of many such murals Nivola painted and etched directly on walls. They were commissioned in 1969 by the project architects Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott, under

the direction of Paul Rudolph, the same architects who had commissioned his two works for Quincy House at Harvard. Boston also houses a sgraffito mural in the lobby of 1050 Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge, and (now no longer on display) a mural originally for the Provident Institution for Savings.

More significant than the impressive scale of the two Hurley murals, is its elaborate narrative explicating the purposes of the Massachusetts State Division of Employment Security, housed in the building. Nivola was commissioned to make two facing murals for the lobby: one on the theme of “Unemployment Insurance” and the benefits it provided to families and society; the other on the theme of “Employment Service” and how skills training aids workers and the economy. The art work is unique in depicting the functions and benefits of the American social service system, reflecting the ideal of government’s capacity to address social ills. The murals not only capture a moment in Massachusetts history, but thanks to their aesthetic merits, have a strong and vitalizing effect on viewers.

Nivola, a contemporary, neighbor, and friend of de Kooning, Pollock, Steinberg, Calder, and many other artists, also worked on a smaller, more personal scale and had shows in New York City and in Italy almost every year. He took on one or two large commissions with architects a year, and pursued his own art for the balance of the time.

A foundation and Nivola Museum dedicated to his work was established in his hometown in central Sardinia, Italy in 1994.

Currently, an exhibition of his work with architects, *Nivola in New York: Figure in Field*, is being held at The Cooper Union from January 23rd through March 15th, 2020.

A partial list of projects follows, showing the range of Nivola’s career working with such architects as Le Corbusier, Eero Saarinen, Paul Rudolph, Pietro Belluschi, BBPR, Raymond Loewy, Marcel Breuer, Josep Lluís Sert and many others. He executed 21 pieces across the five boroughs of New York alone.

In 1967 the American Institute of Architects awarded Nivola the medal for achievement in the field of art in architecture.

Costantino Nivola (1911-1988)

Submitted by the Nivola family, February 2020