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The Persian Water Rug Fountain

Balboa Park's Lost Treasure

[By Parker H. Jackson](#)

[Photographs from this article](#)

Located at the isolated end of a small garden between the Casa de Balboa and the House of Hospitality, just off the El Prado, is one of the most unique and subtle tile fountains in San Diego's Balboa Park. It is the "Persian Water Rug". Conceived by Nationally known San Diego Architect, Richard S. Requa, AIA, the Supervisor of Architecture and Landscaping for the 1935 Exposition, the Water Rug's pedigree can be traced to ancient Persian gardens and palaces.¹ The style is called 'chadar', which means shawl. Requa's 1935 photograph of it appears in page 141 of his book, *Inside Lights on the Building of San Diego's Exposition: 1935*. However, there is only a brief mention of it's location.²

The fountain is located at the Southern terminus of the axis, which ends on the North with the 1915 Botanical Building. The garden between the buildings slopes down from the arcade on the Prado, with the fountain centered on a low wall at its end. It provided a focal point of color to catch the eye framed against the lush background foliage of the previous 1915 Exposition plantings. The combination of its subtle hues and water sparkling over its serrated surface, along with its location away from the hustle of the Prado provided an area of quiet retreat for the 1935 Exposition visitors.

After dark, an even more spectacular scene would have captured the eye. Concealed indirect lighting caused the surface to shimmer and glow and the graceful urns on either side were softly lighted from below. The trees in the canyon behind it were also highlighted by concealed soft hue floodlights set flush with the ground.

As relatively simple as the fountain appears, a few tiles with water running down its face, the true artistry is the result of a combination of carefully designed and executed factors. First, is the location and scale of the work in relation to the area in which it is placed, large enough to catch the eye from the Prado, but with human proportions close-up. Next the colors and patterns of the tiles suggest a Persian carpet draped over the wall. Finally, the plain low wall on which it is placed integrated it with the adjacent dense background foliage. In other words, this was not a case of a blank wall at a dead end path, and what should be done with it, but a well thought out artistic tile fountain.

Requa's architectural philosophy was centered on the Mediterranean Style that dominated the 1920's. He made 2 extensive photographic trips to Spain and the Mediterranean. He published a lavish photographic portfolio of architectural details, gardens and fountains following the 1926 trip and a bound volume after the 1928 trip.³

Overall, the tile installation is 74" wide and 44" tall, with a 60" wide face panel and a 74" by 17" basin at the base. The blue tile edging extends 30" past the basin on both sides around the base of the urn platforms. The top and face panel are 6" x 6" Gladding, McBean Pattern TA-18.⁴ The panel is surrounded by a solid border of almost iridescent Cobalt Blue 6"x6" tiles and a band of Gold 6" x 1.75" tiles. The edges and bowl of the basin are matching Blue tiles with bullnose tiles along the finished edges.

It was first assumed that the border tiles and panel were from the D. and M. Tile Company in Los Angeles. The basis for this was their letter dated, April 10, 1935, which refers to "the Persian type decorative and plain tile to be set on the wall in the park...as per your [Requa's] drawings...the sum of one hundred and twenty five dollars". Requa's reply on April 11, referred to a "design ...I have requested that a regular order be sent you for supplying the tile".⁵ However, with the opening of the Exposition only a few weeks away, it is believed that Requa opted for the standard decorative panel from Gladding, McBean, rather than a custom design from D. and M. The company making the solid color border tiles is certain as one of the broken fragments of the blue border tiles has the markings of the American Encaustic Tiling Co. on the back: [T7S AET CO].

Two light wells on either side illuminated glazed urns. The originals, now missing, were also from Gladding, McBean.⁶ A row of waterproof lights in the basin illuminated the face of the tile.⁷ A small perforated copper pipe across the top provided a gentle flow of water, that rippled down across the top and face of the fountain. The unique corrugated manner of setting each row of face tiles with the top edge extended 1/2" out beyond the row above provides a pleasant quiet rippling sound.

By 1995 the fountain's fate was uncertain. The fountain's water had been turned off decades ago, its copper feed pipe was gone and the light fixtures were empty shells. The urns were gone and leaves and debris littered the dry basin. Fortunately, the face tiles of the Persian Water Rug and its basin were still in very good condition. Being off the beaten path is what had preserved them for 70 years.

In 1995, the adjacent House of Hospitality, also designed by Requa for the 1935 Expo, was due to be dismantled and reconstructed with its 1935 configuration and details. The Persian Water Rug was in the path of all the major equipment needed for the contractor's work. Various proposals were suggested: replace it with a 'copy' in fiberglass or all new tiles; remove it completely to a museum; remove the original intact to storage until the building was finished, then reinstall and restore it. The latter option was chosen, although the basin was destroyed in the process.

In November, the wall on both sides of the main panel and the concrete sidewalk around the basin were cut. Heavy pipes were inserted through holes drilled on either side of the panel to serve as handles to lift the fountain. Supported by a crane, an attempt to 'rock' it loose as a unit failed, the basin separated from the back. The damage to the basin tiles was too extensive for repair, but it was kept to serve as a pattern for its replacement. The main panel was lowered into a specially designed steel frame and trucked to the adjacent storage yard, where it sat for two years as the building project progressed.

In July, 1997, the wall and area surrounding the fountain's location were ready for it to be put back in place. A crane gently lifted it from its steel frame and lowered into it the gap in the new wall. It was leveled with nuts on stainless steel all-thread bolts that had been epoxied into the underside of the base. The gaps in the wall were filled and the reconstruction of the basin began. The original basin was moved on site to serve as a reference for exact measurements in constructing the concrete forms for the new one. A detailed sketch of the original dimensions, tile sizes, and placement was used to assure accuracy.

The production of the new blue basin tiles and the four damaged blue border tiles, along with the repair of the incidental chips and cracks on some of the face panel tiles, was done by Donna Williams from the Sculpture Conservation Studio in Los Angeles. None of the face panel tiles had to be replaced. The basin reconstruction was done by Master Carpenter David Serafen under the supervision of Frank Najera and Matt McPherson, who were overseeing the project for general contractor Soltek Construction Co.

Unfortunately, today, although in its original 1935 location, the quiet splashing of the water down its face is lost in the roar of commercial jets approaching the San Diego airport, the clatter of service and garbage trucks using the walkway behind the fountain and the parking area immediately adjacent to the fountain. The City has made no attempt to design landscaping to screen this commercial activity. Where it was once set against a background of lush foliage, you now see the structure for the dumpsters and the parking area for commercial delivery trucks. The fountain's background setting is bleak. At night, the subtle lighting of the fountain's face is lost to the overpowering orange glare from the lampposts, which were not part of the original garden design. There is not even an interpretive panel adjacent to the fountain to describe its history. It must seem a puzzle to park visitors today.

Notes

1. Garden Historian Carol Greentree's reference to Jonas Lehrman, *Earthly Paradise, Gardens and Courtyards of Islam* (Thames and Hudson, 1980).
2. Richard S. Requa, AIA, *Inside Lights on the Building of San Diego's Exposition: 1935* (San Diego: Richard S. Requa, AIA, 1937) 151. Requa's other 1935 Gardens are Casa del Rey Moro and Alcazar, both with tile fountains copied from their originals in Spain. He describes them in his book, "Inside Lights...." Pgs 87-111, with their photos on 33, 89, 97. The fountain shapes reflect the originals exactly, however, the tile patterns were freely adapted from American companies' catalogs.
3. Richard S. Requa, AIA, *Architectural Details, Spain and the Mediterranean* (Los Angeles: Monolith Portland Cement Co., 1926) 288. Richard S. Requa, AIA, *Old World Inspiration for American Architecture* (Los Angeles: Monolith Portland Cement Co., 1929) 288. Both are collector's pieces today.
4. Gladding, McBean & Co., "Decorative Field Designs," *Tile Tropico Faience Decorative Floor Catalog* (circa 1928): Pg. 25.
5. San Diego Central Library, Special Collections; 1935 CPIE Collection; Box 17, File "Exhibition Correspondence"; Letter from D. and M. Tile Company to Richard S. Requa, April 10, 1935 and carbon copy of Requa's April 11, 1935 reply.
6. Gladding, McBean & Co., Vase No. 88, Height 33 inches \$52.50," *Pottery Catalog*, Pg.11.
7. Alston Rodgers, "Light and Color at the San Diego Exposition," *General Electric's The Magazine of Light* January, 1936: Pg. 9.

Parker Jackson describes himself as "Requa's Historian" and an authority on the architecture of the 1935 California Pacific International Exposition. He has cataloged Requa's extensive architectural drawings and 16mm motion picture collections at the San Diego History Center. His lectures on Requa and the 1935 Expo incorporate videotapes of Requa's films. The author is working on 2 books on Requa, one a biography and the other on his architectural works.



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Richard S. Requa, Architect.
[photo# 89.17220]



The main panel of the fountain, in its custom steel frame on its way to be reinstalled in June 1997. Steel rods have been fixed into each end to tie it into the new wall. 02PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



The original fountain wall panel with a new basin. The patches on the face of the panel are the repairs to the minor chipping that occurred over the years. 03PWR Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



The back of the fountain wall panel in the storage yard where it sat for two years before being put back on its original site. 04PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



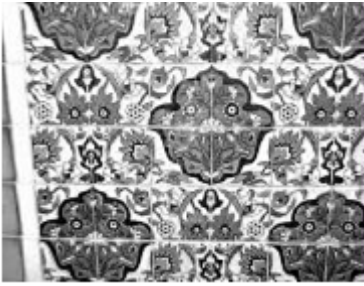
Missing blue border tiles (lower right and center), prior to restoration. 05PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



Broken blue border tiles prior to restoration. Note the face panel tile pattern continues onto the top level of the fountain. A thin copper water feed pipe will be installed across the top, flush with the edge of the blue border tiles. 06PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



The original basin and recessed light well unit was moved back on site to insure accurate dimensions for the construction of the new basin. The original light well covers are seen in front of it. 07PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



The top edge of each tile is 1/2" out from the bottom of the tile above it. This provides a soft rippling sound as the water runs down the face of the fountain. 08PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



The light well cover, in front of the urn has two openings with iron louvers to direct the light upwards. The replacement urn is epoxied at the base to prevent theft. 09PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



Close view of the bullnose blue border tiles across the back of the top. This overhang onto the back of the wall is to enhance the effect of this being a rug or shawl draped over the wall. 11PWR
Photo courtesy of Parker Jackson.



The Persian Water Rug as it looked in 1935, from Richard S. Requa's book, *Inside Lights on San Diego's Exposition: 1935*, page 141 photo by Richard S. Requa. 01PWR



The Persian Water Rug, as it looks today. Copyright ShadowBox Studio.



Detail of Persian Water Rug. Copyright ShadowBox Studio.



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