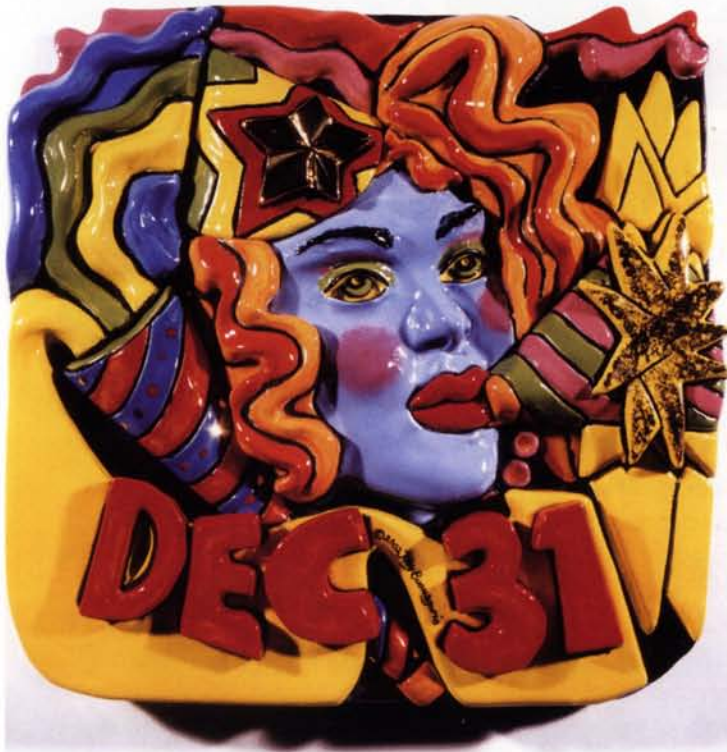


AN ALUMNA'S GIFT TO NEW YORK:  
PUBLIC ART AT TIMES SQUARE



By **Ellis Simon**

**E**ach day approximately a half million people pass through the Times Square – 42nd Street subway station. As they rush to catch their trains, keep an appointment or make a curtain call, they might spy a unique work of public art created by Toby Buonagurio '69, '71MA. Titled "Times Square Times: 35 Times," it consists of 35 unique ceramic relief sculptures depicting the high-energy life around Times Square, long known as "The Crossroads of the World," done in Ms. Buonagurio's unique "over-the-top, hyper-active" style. The project is five years in the making and the last five sculptural ceramic reliefs were installed during the summer.

A Bronx native who lives in the Morris Park section, a few blocks from her childhood neighborhood, Toby Buonagurio, nee Rosensaft, embodies the New York experience, including attending CUNY, where two life-changing events happened. An energetic mentor, Professor Walter Yovaisch, drew her to ceramics as a medium; and she met her husband of 37 years, fellow art student Edgar Buonagurio '69.

Today they live in a modest house on a quiet Bronx street, where the passerby is likely to miss their 2,300 square-foot studio in a turn-of-the-century building attached to the rear of the house. That is where they pursue separate careers as successful artists. Ms. Buonagurio is a Senior Professor of Art at Stony Brook University, where she has taught for 31 years, heads the ceramic sculpture program, and is Studio Programs Coordinator for the Art Department. Edgar is a painter who devotes full time to creating art.

**Toby Buonagurio's art captures the high-octane energy of Times Square.**

## Creating Public Art at the Crossroads of the World

Toby Buonagurio took to ceramics because the tactility and plasticity of the medium allowed her to create any three-dimensional object she could imagine. "It's a chameleonic medium that can take on any shape and look like anything," she says. She is proud that people usually don't immediately recognize her work as ceramic. "Ceramic is an important medium for me, but that's not the first thing I want people to see. I want them to look at the art and be interested in its expressive ideas and sculptural components."

Most of her ideas are drawn from popular culture. "I always retain some aspects of the source images so everyone can recognize them," she explains. "Then I make changes. What is small I make large and what is large I make small. I also crop, distort and invent among many other processes. The combination of the familiar and unfamiliar is of interest to me and hopefully to other people." For example, Michelangelo's "David" became the inspiration for a piece called "Neon Idol Dave". "The 'David' is one of the most important works of Western art and I transformed him into an Elvis-like figure," she explains. Toby's work both celebrates and critiques popular culture. "It plays one against the other," she notes.

"Times Square Times: 35 Times" is organized around three themes – performing arts, fashion and street life – to capture the high-octane energy of the Times Square area. Some of the sculptural reliefs are close-ups, like a pair of hands playing a piano; others show a more expansive view, like a couple dining.

"The idea was to create tight visual composites comprised of three or four images that would give the viewer an overall impression of my conceptual themes," she says. "For example, in one relief titled: 'Female Singer and Saxophone,' a pair of hands, a microphone and a saxophone suggest a narrative of what one might encounter in a local jazz club."

Ms. Buonagurio spent months touring, sketching and photographing people and sites in the Times Square area. Her drawings became the basis for the composite reliefs she carved from the still-malleable clay. After the pieces dried she fired them in her kiln. Finally, she applied glazes and put the relief sculptures through additional firings to achieve the distinctive appearance for which her ceramic sculpture is internationally recognized. "I've worked for nearly 40 years to achieve a particular look," she says. "One of the things people see when they first encounter my work is a suggestion of what they are going to experience when they go up into the street," she notes, "and when they leave Times Square and return to the subway it reminds them of what they've seen."



Toby Buonagurio's work has been exhibited worldwide in 25 solo exhibitions and over 200 group shows, from the Bronx to Japan. By creating art for Times Square she and her husband Edgar have also become part of the City's permanent history, since one of the reliefs depicts the pair as tourists; she taking photographs, he sketching.

Toby will also create a website, [www.tobytimesquare.com](http://www.tobytimesquare.com), where she will offer limited edition, numbered photographs of the sculptural ceramic reliefs, hand signed by herself and the photographer (Edgar).

The experience of creating the artwork, together with the support she received from MTA Arts for Transit, which commissioned her work for the Times Square - 42nd Street Subway Station, together with the acclaim she's received from those who have seen the work, has been a "fantastic experience" says Ms. Buonagurio. Adds Edgar: "What's better for an artist than to create a permanent artwork for the city that you love, the city that you live in?"

### For Love and Art: Toby and Edgar met at CCNY

Toby and Edgar Buonagurio met as art students in a required calligraphy class at CCNY. Both were studying to become artists and art teachers. Toby teaches at Stony Brook University, in part, because of the acclaim for her studio work. After 11 years as a teacher, Edgar did well enough as a painter to devote fulltime to creating art.

While they share a keen interest in international travel and a large working studio behind their Bronx home, their careers

and styles are quite distinctive. Toby works in bold, vivid colors and takes much of her inspiration from popular culture; Edgar's palette is much more subdued. His abstract paintings reference age and wear in evoking exotic places and ancient times.

Edgar's unusual colors and textures are derived from a unique process he developed nearly thirty-five years ago, involving multiple layers of paint followed by the application of abrasives to excavate hidden imagery, creating "artifacts" with smooth, multi-hued surfaces. "It's a sense of interaction between the object and the elements over time revealing beauty through a process of decrepitation of that which once was new," he explains. He is best known for large, commissioned public art works like "Fantail," which hangs in the atrium of the Time Warner building in Stamford, Conn.

Working in close quarters has produced some cross-pollination. Explains Edgar: "Our work most closely resembles one another's when the color is stripped out because we both have a fondness for ornament; that is to say, symbolic patterning and the decorative"

They have occasionally shown their work together, including a 1996 exhibition at Hostos Community College for their 25th anniversary. "I like the idea of having my work and Toby's stand one against the other and having the third element—the viewer—try to figure it out."

"Edgar's work asks you to get very close to it and look at it very intimately," adds Toby. "My work, on the other hand, can surprise you with boldness and brightness. There's a push-pull, a kind of magnetic energy, and that's what I think people have responded to when we've shown together." ■



**Photos (top left):** Edgar Buonagurio '69 with paintings in the Bronx studio he shares with wife, Toby. **(Top right):** Sculptor Toby Buonagurio '69, '71MA displays one of her works. **(ABOVE PHOTOS: BILL SUMMERS)** **(Bottom left):** "Magic Show," one of Toby Buonagurio's ceramic relief sculptures commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority/Arts for Transit for the Times Square - 42nd St. Subway Station. **(Opposite page):** "New Year's Eve." **(PHOTOS: EDGAR BUONAGURIO)**