

The Japanese Victorian tiles: a Synthesis of East and West Savoir-faire

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1) Art nouveau in Japan

Similar to Europe, Japan also, at the turn of the XXth century developed its own «Arts and Crafts movement» the “mingei”, whose objective was to rediscover the roots of its artistic traditions in Japanese antiquity, while incorporating at the same time certain foreign elements. As early as 1890, the ideas of the British Arts and Crafts movement were introduced in a few Japanese magazines. This corresponds to the wave of modernization on modern Japan during the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) periods and with the creating in large industrial cities of technical schools with departments related to arts and traditional crafts (ceramics and design) important for developing the learning of modern ceramic technology with the help of foreign teachers.

2) Japan interested by European Architectural ceramic at the beginning of the XXth century

From the end of the XIXth century, European ceramic companies catalogues also promoted an important corpus of designs while international exhibitions offered real forums for promoting arts and cultural interface.

Japanese companies were present at all these exhibitions. They brought back to Japan a few specimens of tiles to be locally reproduced and also colouring material, moulds and ovens. At the same time Japanese artists staying in Europe began to introduce new concepts and techniques upon returning to Japan while European designers were invited by Japanese firms to work in Japan.

These comings and goings of tile art lie at the origin of the diffusion and encounter of western and eastern artistic traditions.

3) Japan as a Promoter of European Tiles

At the beginning, Japan probably imported tiles and moulds from different big European companies (The British Doulton, Minton, Maw and Co; the French Sarreguemines, Sèvres, Gentil et Bourdet; the German Villeroy et Boch, the Portuguese Caldas da Rainhas, etc.)

Tile was in fact a very good material perfectly adapted to meeting the sanitary and health requirements of tropical and subtropical countries. Japan, very much concerned with salubrity standards, wanted to impose these tiles for its population and its colonies as well.

4) Japanese Tiles Companies and Export Trade

At that time, Japan already had an excellent background for producing high quality ceramics so it was quite easy to locally develop tiles in European fashion and to export them to East and South-East Asia. Japanese tiles were mainly produced for export, the usage was limited to Japan itself where it was only found in «Western style houses», public buildings, hotels (for bathroom and toilets). As a matter of fact, the traditional wood houses didn't require this material. The production centers: Nagoya in the main island and Saga, Nagasaki in the island of Kyushu.

The peak of the exports occurred between 1920 and 1925. Japan exported to China, and South-East Asia (through the Chinese diaspora), India, Middle-East and America. Japan's objective was to show Europe that Japanese artists had reached a high level of ceramics production with quality similar to European tiles. But after 1931 and the start of the Sino-Japanese war, Japan began to lack raw materials, so progressively, during the second world war, the export network was discontinued and the Japanese factories closed.

The companies Dento, Fujimiyaki still exist. Others have ceased activities. It is interesting to note that the Japanese Art nouveau tile was short-lived, like the European one.

5) Tiles as a substitution for traditional decorations.

On the East coast of China and South-East Asia, the decorative tile enjoyed great success because it was economically accessible, well adapted to local climate, resistant and could advantageously replace the traditional decorations: clay sculptures, brick carvings, ceramic figurines, paintings on the front and ridges of the Chinese houses and temples which needed qualified workers and higher costs. Tiles were not only used in new houses but also for repairs. They aimed at giving the structure a new look and at displaying the rank and wealth of the owner. That's the reason why they became a trend.

6) Description of the Japanese tile called «Victorian tile» or «Majolica»

The company's name is written on the back with the indication «made in Japan». Most tiles are relief-molded.

The size varies: 15,2cm square and for corner or ridges 15,2 x 7,6cm, 15,2 x 5,1, 15,2 x 3,8, 7,6 x 7,6cm

There are two kinds of motives, naturalistic and geometric. The naturalistic motive includes fruits, flowers and animals. But while the animal motive is scarcely seen on relief-molded tiles, the auspicious fruit and flower motive concerns most of the tiles. The geometric motive presents the advantage of being endlessly duplicated.

7) Compositions

Tiles may be freely used in some compositions. The objective is to orchestrate a combination of colours without coordination; The colours that predominate are crimson, pink, sea-green, emerald, turquoise. The convergence of these different shades produces a very dynamic effect.

Other compositions reveal a perfectly symmetrical schema evocating a carpet. There are a lot of different compositions. And we can add that it seems there is no limit to the creativity of the artist.

Conclusion

The Japanese tile is characteristic of the capacity of Japanese companies and Japanese artists to be brilliant imitators but also to break away from western influence while producing their own style more representative of the Japanese culture. Adding its cultural imprint to a model borrowed from other cultures was also a strategy reinforced by the growing Japanese nationalism during the 1930s.

The Japanese tiles are a precious heritage that illustrates commercial links and cultural encounter of artistic traditions and savoir-faire at the very beginning of the XXth century. But it is also an endangered heritage which needs a serious protection before it is too late as modernity and urbanisation have already generated the disparition of an important part of this precious corpus.