

700 Hundred Years of English Tiles

The medieval tradition of tile making in England coincided with the development of Gothic art and architecture which flourished from the early 13th century to early 16th century. During this period tiles were used mainly for floors in churches, castles and palaces as only the clergy, kings and the aristocracy could afford such a luxury. One of the most characteristic tiles of this period is the two-coloured tile showing a yellow design of inlaid clay against a red-brown background.

At the beginning of the 16th century émigré potters from Italy introduced the maiolica technique (painting with colours on white tin glaze) to northern Europe including England, where the main developments in this technique took place in the 18th century in such towns as London, Bristol and Liverpool. The tiles were mainly painted in blue-and-white (occasionally in purple) and were often used in fireplaces or sometimes in dairies. They are known as English delftware tiles, acknowledging the influence of Dutch blue-and-white delftware.

The Industrial Revolution had a great impact on English tile manufacture and began with the development of transfer printing on tiles during the second half of the 18th century. The printer John Sadler and his partner Guy Green in Liverpool were the first to apply this to tiles in 1756 and it was developed further by ceramic manufacturers like Spode and Copeland, and it became one of the principal methods of tile decorating in the 19th century. New manufacturing methods were also developed for tile production in which manufacturers like Herbert Minton led the way. In 1835 he obtained a share in a patent for the making of encaustic floor tiles and in 1840 he joined with the engineer Richard Prosser who had invented a method for dust pressing clay. Minton adapted this for making wall tiles using large tile presses which laid the foundation for the industrial production of tiles in England.

The hey-day of English tile making was during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) when tiles began to be mass produced and for the first time were put to large scale use in churches, public buildings, shops and houses. Tiles are dirt- and fireproof, are easily cleaned and highly decorative and are an ideal medium to be used in the interior and on the exterior of buildings. This led to an enormous demand and many tile factories were set up to meet it. Stoke-on-Trent was the biggest production centre where firms like Minton & Co., Minton, Hollins & Co. Mintons China Works, Campbell Brick & Tile Co., Copeland and Wedgwood were located, while at Jackfield in Shropshire there were Maw & Co. and Craven Dunnill and in Lugwardine in Hereford the firm Godwin. The variety of tiles made was enormous often featuring striking naturalistic images created by designers like John Moyr Smith and William Wise as well as more formal decorations, which is one reason why they are so eagerly collected today.

However there were also voices critical of unbridled industrial mass production. Men like William Morris and William De Morgan developed ideas of an alternative society harking back to medieval times but based on socialist foundations in which hand work rather than machine manufacture was the dominant means of production. This was

known as the Arts and Crafts Movement. A key event was the setting up of the firm Morris & Co. in London 1861 where their ideas were put into practice with the making of interior furnishings created by hand included the decorating of tiles. William De Morgan became the Arts and Crafts tile maker *par excellence* and truly beautiful hand crafted tiles were made by him. Morris and De Morgan strove to improve the decorative quality of design and by doing so they also had a beneficial influence on the design of industrial mass produced tiles.

At the turn of the last century, the Art Nouveau style, characterised by its natural, swirling lines and striking use of colour, held sway as the dominant style in Europe and also had a great influence on tile design in England. Leading tile manufacturers of the day like Pilkington's and Doulton seized on the great popularity of the new style and introduced extensive ranges of Art Nouveau tiles created by prominent designers of the day such as C.F.A Voysey, Lewis Day and William Neatby. The greatest production centre of mass produced Art Nouveau tiles was in Stoke-on-Trent where firms like Marsden Tile Co., J. H. Barratt & Co. and W. & E. Corn made high quality dust pressed Art Nouveau tiles.

Between 1918 and 1940 the demand for plain tiles rose but the manufacture of decorative tiles fell sharply. Tiles were predominately decorated with geometric relief designs, tubelined patterns or hand painted pictures, some of them in the now celebrated Art Deco style. Carter & Co. in Poole and H. & R. Johnson in Stoke-on-Trent were leading manufacturer of this type of tile. There were also small firms like Dunsmore in London who painted and stencilled tiles by hand with series of birds, fishes and farm animals.

Modern tile making in England after 1945 shows a diverse history of big and small firms augmented by tiles made by individual tile makers. A few big firms dominated the mass market like Richards Tiles Ltd, Carter & Co. and H. & R. Johnson and their tiles often show abstract designs which were popular in the 1950s and 60s. But there are also small firms like Purbeck Decorative Tile Co. who specialise in screen printed tiles which became the technique of the modern age. This period also saw the rise of individual tile makers catering for a specialist market like Kenneth Clark, Stephen Cocker and Charles Allen who made hand crafted individual tiles or tile panels of great originality. They shows that despite the introduction of mass production techniques in tile manufacture, the hand of the tile artist guided by his or her own creativity still occupies an important part in the long history of English tile making

The majority of tiles in the exhibition have come from the private collection of Hans van Lemmen augmented by tiles from the private collections of Chris Blanchett, Henk Nijenhuis, Mark van Veen and Helen Paul.