

Tales of Tiles in Ottoman Empire

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In this article the progress of Turkish tiling art during the Seljuk and Ottoman periods in Anatolia is discussed. Paralleling historical development, examples are given examples of tile techniques both on interior and exterior surfaces. Description of tiling development is given within a diachronic method analysing the original patterns and techniques as a sign of Anatolian civilisation.

Introduction

The origin of the word 'tile' comes from Persian noun phrase 'Çin-I' which means tiles manufactured in the Chinese style. The same word has been used in Turkish for glazed patterns or coloured panels. Tile art, that has a great importance in traditional Turkish art, has developed over several centuries. Tiles are widely used in the architecture of many Turkish, monuments, as well as other states in Asia. These developments and the significance of Turkish tile art are discussed below.

Turkish settlement of Anatolia intensified after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. The Seljuk commander Kutalmışoğlu Süleyman Şah extended his conquests in Anatolia westward, taking Iznik from Byzantium in 1075. He made Iznik his capital and announced the independence of the Anatolian Seljuk state, which lasted until 1318, when the Ilkhanids wiped out the last Anatolian Seljuk sultanate.

The present-day district of Sogut in the province of Bilecik is where, in the time of the Anatolian Seljuk sultanate, the beylik (principality) of the Osmanogullari was established in the year 1299 by Osman Bey. What in time became known as the Ottoman Empire was to last until 1922, and it held sway over vast amounts of territory that reached into North Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Central Asia, Crimea and Central Europe.

At around this time it began to be very common to see the use of tile art both in interior and exterior architecture, with the colour turquoise dominating, indicating eternity (Figures 1 and 2). In the following Ottoman period, especially when the Empire was in its developing stage, tile art was continually improved by the usage of many novel techniques introduced at that time. It is interesting to note that the quality of Turkish tile art began to deteriorate as the Ottoman Empire went into decline many years later.

Minai Technique

The colour of dough in the Minai technique is yellowish. Lime (alkali) was used as the binding material to form dough. This was turned into a moulded dough panel and glazed without

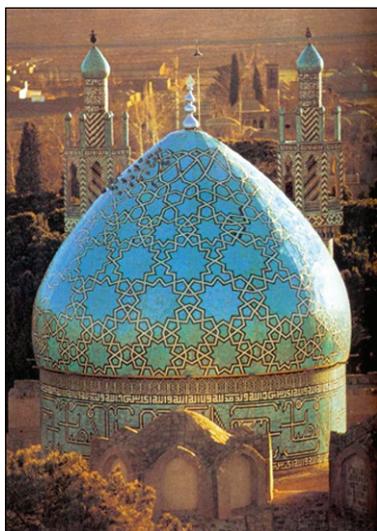


Figure 1 (left)
Shah Nimetullah's Tomb, Iran

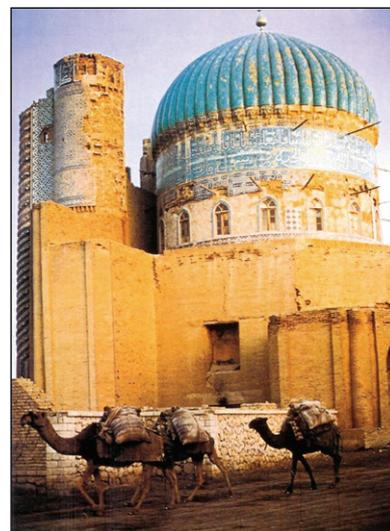


Figure 2 (right)
Hacı Ebu Nasr Parse's Tomb, Afghanistan

undercoating. There were four colours used in these temperature-resistant tiles which were painted, underglazed and then patterned: green, dark blue, purple and turquoise. In subsequent processing colours could be added to the tiles, painting in red terracotta and black, and coating with gold leaves. The final stage involved placing the clay in a low-temperature oven. Taking into account the relatively primitive technology available to the tile makers at that time, the process would have required a very high degree of skill. Yet very high quality tiles were produced.

The 13th century saw the birth of civic architecture in the Anatolian Seljuk state. With the accession in the year 1205 of Sultan Gıyaseddin Keyhüsrev, the Seljuk state began to expand, taking over the Black Sea trade routes and the port of Antalya on the Mediterranean. After the death of Sultan Gıyaseddin Keyhüsrev, his son İzzeddin Keykavus (1211–1220) started to open up the Syrian trade routes, and the empire made Anatolia the focal point for trade. The empire reached its highest point under Sultan Aladdin Keykubat (1221–1237), when it became a place of power that relied on the wealth and endurance of its resources.

Most common patterns and designs in artistic tile panels from this time were stars, crosses, squares and diamonds, accompanied by throne scenes representing court life, various hunting scenes (Figure 3) and especially flowers. Examples of such tiles can be seen in Konya Alaaddin Köşkü (villa) which is the only building remaining in Anatolia where Minai technique tiles can still be seen *in situ*.



Figure 3 Alaaddin Kiosk, Konya, Turkey

Mosaic Tile Technique

In the mosaic method each tile is glazed with various colours such as turquoise, purple, green, dark blue and then cut before assembling a pattern on a plaster base. Best examples of such tiles can be found on the Dome of Konya Karatay Medresesi (school) as well as Sivas Gök Medresesi. The patterns in both the former and the latter are mainly foliage and geometrical patterns and motifs. At the latter location there is a monumental structure with a large entrance decorated with these tiles. Several examples are still to be found in Anatolia and in Iran (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4
Sivas Gök
Medrasaha,
Sivas, Turkey

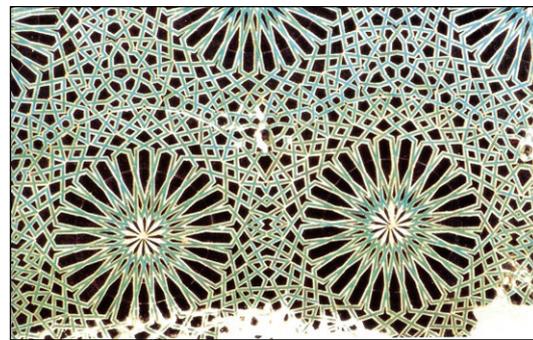


Figure 5 Karatay Medrasaha, Konya, Turkey

Overglazed (Perdah) Technique

In this technique metallic glitter is the first thing that attracts the attention. The glazed paint was fired at 750–800 °C. In this method the surface of the tiles was covered with a thin layer of metal oxides, such as silver and copper oxides, layered over a matt white and purple tile, and then these tiles are glazed and kiln-dried again at low temperature. The tiles of Kubhadabat Court whose walls are covered with stars and cross-shaped human and animal figures are important examples of this technique.

Colour-glaze Technique

In this technique the contour (outline) of the patterns were carved and pressed onto a red dough, coated with paint and then kiln-dried. A similar method involved the application of a red dough panel onto a white undercoat. Outlines of the patterns were drawn with a sugary mixture of chrome and manganese compounds, then coated with coloured glaze paint and kiln-dried. Black outlines prevented the colours from mixing. Çinili Köşk (the Tiled Villa), a building which belongs to the early periods of Ottoman Empire when the technique was at its zenith, exhibits the best examples of this technique. In particular, its monumental entrance gate, the 'iwan' is tiled from top to bottom. The dominance of Kufi and Sulus writings on the gate enhanced the effect. It is a very significant example of Ottoman art where tiles are

just used as exterior ornaments. As well as the Seljuks who actually invented the method, the Karamans also knew about the technique (Figure 6).

The so-called Ibrahim Bey almshouse, whose apse was built by this technique instead of mosaic tiles in 1433, is one of the most important examples of the method. The Green Mosque in Bursa (1419–1422) is an example of the level to which Ottoman tiling art had advanced at this time. The colour palette is enriched with additional colours of yellow, peanut green and lavender. Hatayi compositions and peoni motifs of Far Eastern origin are additional concepts that can be seen there (Figures 7–9).



Figure 6 Examples for tiles at Kubadabat Court, Beyşehir, Turkey

Figure 7 Iwan of the Tiled Kiosk, İstanbul

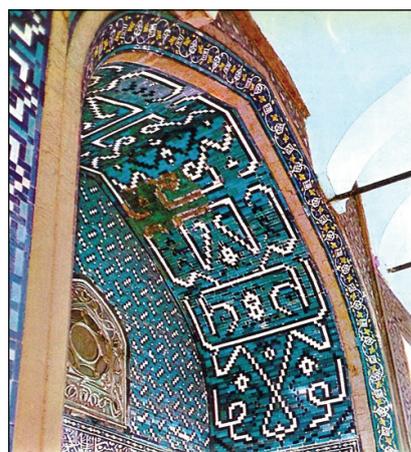


Figure 8 Ibrahim Bey Apse, Tile Kiosk, İstanbul



Figure 9 Green Mosque, Bursa, Turkey

Innovation in the Coloured-glaze Technique

The Ottoman Empire’s ascent, which began in the 15th century under Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, came to a momentary halt during the dispute between his sons, Beyazit II (1481–1512) and Cem (1459–1495). We have information about changes in techniques of tile manufacture from this period in the tombs of Sultan Selim I (1470–1520) and Sahzade Mehmet II. The latter was the son of Beyazit, who had become the bey of the sancak of Caffa

in the Crimea, who died in 1504 while Beyazit was still sultan. The tomb of Sultan Selim (completed in 1522) contains tiles that were painted red after being baked, without glaze. The tomb of Sahzade Mehmet has tile-adorned columns whose capitals and bases have distinctive architectural formations. The arrangement of columns has the appearance of a colonnade.



Figure 10 Similar to Ming style: Ottoman ware

Coloured-glaze techniques were still in use during the 16th century in Istanbul. At the end of the 15th century and in the early 16th century the influence of the Far East, especially the Chinese Ming dynasty, was considerable, with its clouds, stylised dragons, peonies and bunches of grapes (Figure 10), as well as the Çintemani symbol (three ball pattern). Other patterns represented include curling branches, birds, deer, fish, hunting scenes, stylised flowers and rosettes, in other words a great variety of high quality patterns were in use for the first time during this period.

Underglaze Technique

In the second half of the 16th century craftsmen start using a new method called underglaze. In this method the artist applies decoration to the surface of the tile prior to glazing and drying. The transparent glaze in this case turns into a thin layer of glass in the oven. The colour palette can be enriched with turquoise, olive green and blue, while grass green and coral red colours can be layered onto the white tile dough (Figure 11). Most common patterns from this time were chrysanthemum and clouds, bunches of hyacinth, tulip and rose, often mistakenly referred to as Damascus work because these patterns were originally in the 16th century in Damascus. The best examples of the technique can be seen in Iznik tiles.



Figure 11 Three-coloured or Damascus ware

There was a noticeable improvement in the technical quality of the tiles produced in this period as well. Patterns were hand made by palace miniaturists in Istanbul and then sent to Iznik. These patterns were mostly coloured in cobalt blue, turquoise, green and white, and less frequently brown, pink and grey. Other colours occasionally seen included coral red used widely as relief under the glaze. Solid black lines outlining the patterns were effective on these multiple colours. This period is also called the Naturalist period as we can see various

kinds of flowers such as rose, carnation, pomegranate, hyacinth, violet, sprays, and cypresses, as well as designs and descriptions of tulip-like flowers also known as the Turkish flower. Rüstem Paşa Mosque (1561) is an example for a new technical development and patterns of tiles cover the walls, altars and columns of the mosque (Figure 12). Sokullu Mehmet Paşa Mosque in Kadirga (1571) and the Takkeci Ibrahim Ağa Mosque (1591) are other striking examples of the technique.

The Privy Chamber of Sultan Murat III at the Topkapı Palace is possibly the best place to see these very high quality tiles. The walls of the room are covered with such tiles up to the dome. On the white ground are seen pomegranate flowers in a circle shape as well as Chinese clouds in green and red. In the second half of the 16th century such designs were very common. Compositions include spring flowers on branches on the chamber walls.

The front of the palace's Circumcision Room, dating from 1640, is also decorated with similar tiles.

It is clear that the palace miniaturists of the time did their work in the palace by hand and chose the designs according to the place in which the work would be situated, coordinating with other architectural features and lighting. Similar panels are seen in the Baghdad Pavilion built in 1639.

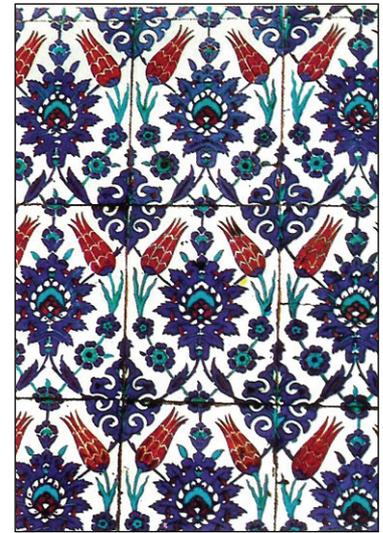


Figure 12 Rüstem Paşa Mosque, Istanbul

Decline

As a result of a decline in the technical quality of tile making, a feeling of attenuation in the design and colours started. Vivid colours appear to be paler than before; coral red turns to brown, for example. The glaze of the white ground runs out and turns into a dirty bluish colour with dots on the surface. It also loses its attractiveness and cracks appear on the glaze. In spite of such technical deterioration in the second half of the 17th century various patterns were still in use. In addition to existing colours, green, turquoise and dark blue were dominant (Figure 13). Nowadays we see motifs and designs from this period with a relatively dull appearance: colours and outlines have faded away, red has turned into brown, glazes have yellowed and cracks and dots appeared on the surfaces of the tiles.



Figure 13 New Mosque, Istanbul

The Ottoman Empire began to lose territory following the treaty of Kucuk Kaynarci in 1699, and with it the traditional art of tile-making began to diminish in importance. By the beginning of the 18th century Iznik tiles are no longer produced. Sultan Ahmet III and his ‘sadrazam’ (vizier) the Great Ibrahim Pasha had a studio with ovens built in Tekfur Palace, with craftsmen from Izmit being employed. Initially tiles similar to Iznik tiles were produced. This initiative lasted for 25 years. Although the tiles produced are similar to Iznik tiles in pattern, Tekfur tiles were not as successful. The glaze is light blue in colour, cracks are more common, colours fade and the tiles are porous in places. In addition to the existing colours, yellow and orange were added by underglaze techniques. Currently, similar tiles are being produced in Kütahya as a craft industry.

Turkish Renaissance

At the beginning of the 20th century Iznik tiles with classical patterns were produced again as people’s understanding of the techniques used to produce them grew. However, this was only as a localised craft industry and the turquoise tiles of Turkish antiquity would never be produced in the same way again. One example of a modern building using this type of tiling is the Çapa Training School, designed by the architect Kemalettin.

Further Reading

Those wanting a fuller introduction and description of Turkish tile art can find it in the book entitled *Turkish Tile and Ceramic Art*, by Oktay Aslanapa, published in Istanbul by Gözen Yayınları in 1999 (in English).