

The Tiles of Iberia

Written and photographed by Tor Eigeland

As the taxi neared the entrance of the new Hotel Husa Sevilla, the gentle splashing of water in the hotel's traditional Andalusian tile fountain drew my eyes and ears irresistibly. The sight and sound of the running water seemed to relieve the heat and brightness that vibrated from the stark exterior of the building.

Once inside the hotel lobby, I saw Alhambra-inspired Spanish tiles everywhere: along the reception desk, on the lobby walls, in the café - even the ceilings were covered. Intricate patterns of brown, blue, red, white and green blended to create a harmonious whole.

Later, walking out of the hotel, I glanced across the street at an old red-brick building. The horseshoe-arched, Moorish-style windows were surrounded by traditional tiles.

A little farther down the street, at a tree-shaded bus stop, people were sitting on the low wall of the neighboring building, fanning themselves and waiting for their buses. They were sitting on tiles: Embedded by the hundreds atop and on the sides of the brick wall, they depicted scenes of daily life in the Seville that existed a century or more ago.

Later in the day, on Sierpes Street, I passed a life-sized automobile advertisement - on tiles. Painted by a Señor Pinto in 1924, this ceramic billboard depicted a magnificent black convertible rolling down a scenic country road. "Studebaker - Automoviles de 6 Cilindros," the headline read.

Tiles were starting to appear wherever I looked. I was definitely becoming tile-struck - just as all of Spain has been for the past 900 years.

Tiles - or *azulejos* - are found everywhere in both Spain and Portugal. They are as much a part of life in the Iberian Peninsula as fresh bread, olives, sunshine or the strumming of a guitar.

The word *azulejo* comes from the colloquial Arabic *al-zulajj*, meaning faience or ornamental tile. Decorative tiles were first made in Mesopotamia, and luster-painted tiles have been produced in the Persian city of Kashan since the ninth century at least. Used primarily to decorate the walls of mosques, by the 13th and 14th centuries Kashan tiles were known for their excellent workmanship and intricate design. They were not only square or rectangular, but were also made in interlocking polygonal shapes whose individual pieces were part of a grander design - foreshadowing the artistic excellence exemplified at the Alhambra, whose interiors were created in the time of Yusuf I in the first half of the 14th century.

Tile art spread and moved west through the Muslim countries. Floor tiles began appearing in Tunisia and on walls in Seville as early as the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th centuries.

Spanish tile eventually became far superior to its eastern predecessors. One reason, according to some experts, may have been the flood of artisans into Muslim Spain, or al-Andalus, as a result of Genghis Khan's invasion of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley in the 13th century. Spain was also a cultural crossroads where crafts that had come from the East via Egypt met and were enriched by the late Roman and Visigothic as well as other Mediterranean decorative traditions.

Tiles grew in popularity, in part because they replaced marble of different colors, which

was expensive and very hard to come by. Artisans had perfected techniques for making tiles in a great variety of colors, offering an easier and cheaper way to beautify a house or mosque or palace. The raw materials, too, were widely and readily available.

The purity of tile colors and their smooth, brilliant surfaces were appealing but also eminently practical: Good tiles afford excellent protection for walls or floors, they last forever, and are easy to clean. In al-Andalus, they were essential to the widespread private and public toilet and bathing facilities that so starkly distinguished Muslim Spain from contemporary Christian-controlled areas of the peninsula.

Fierce rivalry among the great Andalusian cities of Seville, Granada and Cordoba spurred the wealthy and their artisans to new heights. The ornate tile designs of intertwined floral, foliate and geometric figures – known as arabesque - became ever more complex and sophisticated, perhaps reaching their ultimate expression at Granada's Alhambra Palace.

Tile art had progressed considerably from its humble origins. When the Mesopotamians first used glazes, it was a construction material, to make mud walls water-resistant, rather than as a decoration. But glaze also allowed the introduction of color, and surfaces of decorated arabesque panels and painstakingly drawn bands of complicated calligraphy became an indispensable element of Islamic architecture.

Tiles were often made to fit a specific wall or floor, designed in place and then sent to a workshop, the clay slabs usually covered by a fine layer of liquid clay called slip, on which drawings were made.

The methods of making tiles were basically similar in Mesopotamia and Andalusia. Refinements came in later stages, when special colors and a metallic sheen were produced. This is where the potters of al-Andalus surpassed their eastern predecessors.

Here is how traditional Moorish tiles were crafted in Spain - and the methods are essentially the same today.

The slabs themselves were made from high-quality white clay, ground to a fine powder, sieved, mixed with water and then trodden like grapes until properly wedged. To remove excess moisture, the clay was clapped onto an absorbent plaster wall. When partially dry, it was molded in wooden boxes and cut into rectangular sizes, then fired in what are still known as Moorish, or Arab, kilns.

These brick kilns still exist in the Valencia region, in the ancient ceramics centers of Manises and Paterna, as well as in Andalusia. They are not, of course, the very ones used in Islamic times, since the bricks eventually crack with repeated use and the structure must be rebuilt. But it is rebuilt in the same manner as before, and often on the same site.

The kilns consist of a larger lower chamber called the *caldera*, and an upper chamber called the *laboratorio*. They are connected by holes in the floor of the upper chamber that allow heat to pass.

The clay slabs were placed on a platform at the rear of the lower chamber. A fire burning wood and, in the olive-growing regions in the south, leftover olive skins and pits (*orujo*) provided the intense heat required to fire the clay. The resulting absorbent, porous slab was called biscuit (*bizcocho*) and was now ready to be painted.

Especially in the Paterna and Manises region, this work was traditionally - and is still - done only by women. In Andalusia and Portugal, men today sometimes prepare the clay biscuit.

Occasionally the painting of the tiles is done with the tip of a mule's tail, and women I spoke to said there is no better brush. Copper, manganese, platinum and cobalt oxides and alkaline silicates are mixed with water to produce the paint itself.

Designs in the early days were all arabesque - floral and geometric patterns. When animals were drawn, it was always in a highly stylized manner in deference to Islamic tradition. Later, under Christian influence, human figures as well as animals were

drawn realistically.

Next, the tiles were dipped in glazing fluid containing lead and tin oxides - originally a lead-sulfite paste - dissolved in water. The competition in tile production in al-Andalus was so intense that Moorish craftsmen, in order to obtain maximum brilliance and transparency effects, had lead shipped from Venice and tin from England, since these were considered the very best.

The tiles were then fired again in the laboratorio, or upper chamber, where the temperature was lower and no flames could reach them. During this process, the glaze and pigment fused into hard glass, with a high degree of brilliance and smoothness.

Through continual experimentation, another method of tile decoration was developed by the Mudejars, those Muslims living under Christian rule in Spain, as Christian rulers sought to create a lifestyle as magnificent as that of their Muslim predecessors.

The *cuerda seca*, or "dry line," technique involved drawing the principal motif of the decoration, or a grid, along with the connecting links to adjacent pieces, on a fired tile using an oily ink mixed with manganese oxide to give it a dark color. Then, before the second firing, the artisan would flow on water-based oxides for different colors. The glaze would fill in the areas between the oily lines, but would not cross them. The cuerda seca tile would be as splendid as those made the traditional way, with the added benefit that the design stood out in relief, with the separating lines unglazed.

Many of the older tile-painting methods, including cuerda seca, are still in use today. But because traditional tile-making is labor-intensive and therefore costly, it is being replaced to a large extent by factory production. However, most serious tile-making companies maintain a handcrafted line of tiles to supply connoisseurs, and though a factory may acquire two or three gas- or electrically-fired kilns, it often retains at least one fired by wood. The gas kilns make everything too smooth, too perfect, and the tiles lose their individuality, experts say. "And," adds Mark Verderi of Seville's famous Mensaque tile makers, "it is partly the black smoke of the wood-fired kiln that reacts with the chemicals on the tile and give them a certain color and their lovely personality."

Mensaque, which exports all over the world, has encountered a small problem with its Japanese customers - perhaps an indicator of how the rest of the world is going.

"The Japanese, who are extremely interested in everything that is European, old and famous, have a problem with our hand-made tiles," says Verderi. "They say they are not all exactly the same, that our tiles are uneven. They want them perfect, completely perfect. And we are trying to educate them to the fact that this unevenness is precisely what is so lovely about the good tiles. They are basically the same, but not completely identical." He adds, "We are having some success with this."

In both Spain and Portugal, the world of tiles is so vast, varied and colorful, as well as beautiful and often amusing, that it amounts to a very rich, yet largely undiscovered, national resource. Though Iberian tiles are exported by the millions to beautify American bathrooms, to cover Arab walls, or to line Italian swimming pools, the exports cannot convey the magic and beauty of the world of tiles that exists in Spain and Portugal.

Walk down a street in Granada or Lisbon, and you will see them on every corner, in every side street, in every cafe and bar - outside and inside churches, or as street signs. Many are funny, depicting scenes from daily life: farming, cooking, fishing, hunting, folk dance, flowers, rabbits and cows. Tile "paintings" are also everywhere - mostly of historical monuments or events, but also of highly idealized landscapes.

An old Spanish proverb, perhaps dating back to Muslim times, says that "a poor man lives in a house without azulejos." Today, even the poorest Spaniard or Portuguese will have tiles somewhere in his house.

Still towering above the rest of Spain and Portugal is Granada's Alhambra, the symbol of perfection in tessellation. Simple or intricate, its patterns are endlessly copied or used for inspiration, and are still the most popular of all. Lately there has been a resurgence

in demand for these classical patterns, whether hand-made or churned out of a factory.

In the Alhambra's Hall of the Ambassadors, a large reception room of exceptional beauty, one is unlikely to notice at first glance that every arch or doorway employs different patterns of interlaced azulejos. One would think that this variety could not work esthetically, yet the total effect is one of perfect harmony.

In Portugal, the earliest tiles were imported from Seville and the Valencia region of Spain. At the end of the 15th century, tiles made by Muslims were used to good effect in the cathedral of Coimbra and in the Royal Palace of Sintra, where they can still be seen.

Production of tiles in Portugal dates to the second half of the 16th century. The Portuguese style soon took a different tack from that of Spain. Large tiled panels began to be used both inside and outside buildings and palaces. The scenes generally illustrated religious history or depicted life in the countryside. The techniques were undoubtedly of Muslim origin, but their use developed into something quite different.

Sometimes even quite humble homes were covered with tiles on the outside. Eduardo Leite da Silva, manager of Viuva Lamego, Portugal's finest tile factory, says the reason for this was simple: "It was actually cheaper to cover a house with tile than to paint it - since, of course, good tile lasts practically forever."

Perhaps even more than in Spain, the presence of tiles in Portugal is striking, and the tradition of using large tile panels is still strong. Lisbon's streets have huge, modern tile mosaics, and the walls of the Lisbon subway stations are covered with patterns of tiles done by some of the country's foremost artists. In addition to the serious themes of the large tile panels, Portuguese cities and towns feature "azulejos populares" - tiles with a light-hearted, more humorous content that have the advantage of being both attractive and cheap.

Tor Eigeland, a Norwegian freelance photographer now based in London, lived in Spain for more than 20 years.

A Tile Viewers Guide

For tile aficionados who have only enough time or money to visit one region of Spain, Andalusia is the indisputable choice. The Alhambra in Granada is the most important single site, but if your itinerary can include only one city, it would have to be Seville. The 16th-century Casa de Pilatos, built jointly by Muslim and Christian architects, has more colorful tiles per square meter than almost anywhere in Spain. Built as a replica of Pontius Pilate's house in Jerusalem, it has the great advantage of not being overcrowded with tourists and is redolent of jasmine in summer.

The Parque Maria Luisa, built for the great Ibero-American Exhibition of 1929-30, has a profusion of tiles, including tile paintings of important events from Spanish history.

The Alcázar, a palace built in Moorish style in Seville by Peter the Cruel of Castile (1334-69), has some of the most magnificent tile work in Spain.

At La Cartuja monastery, within the precincts of EXPO '92, 400 years of tile art are displayed on the walls, from 15th-century tiles to ones crafted by Pickman in the 19th century. Many are being painstakingly restored, chipped glazes and obscured patterns reconstructed.

Catalonia has striking examples of the imaginative use of tiles by the most famous of all Spanish architects, Antonio Gaudí, and modernist architects like Lluís Domènech i Montaner. La Casa Amatller and La Casa Batlló, both on Barcelona's Paseo de Gracia, are prime examples. Gaudí's Parque Güell is also impressive, and La Casa Vicens on Las Carolinas Street, one of Gaudí's first projects, finished in 1885, blends a liberated Mudéjar style with modernism.

In Valencia, there is tile work worth seeing at the 16th-century former seminary called the Colegio del Patriarca, at the old railway station café, and last but not least, at the Neri factory shop at Poeta Querol Street No. 1. Neri is said to be one of the two or three best tile shops in the world, and just about every style ever made is sold here, from copies of 12th-century tiles to modern ones by Catalonia's famous Javier Mariscal.

In Lisbon, a comparable shop called Viuva Lamego is located at Largo do Intendente Street No. 25, in a

building whose entire façade is covered with tiles. Without question it is one of the most colorful shops anywhere, and every sort of tile made in Portugal is represented here—most made by the firm's own artisans. The manager, Leite da Silva, will happily tell a visitor all there is to know about Portuguese tiles, and more.

The Museu da Cidade, or Municipal Museum, of Lisbon has a rich collection of tiles ranging from classical to modern, and the Royal Palace of Sintra and the Quinta da Bacalhoa contain prime examples of classical tiles.

The Palace of the Marquises of Fronteira on the outskirts of Lisbon is a charmingly run-down and somewhat abandoned-looking structure, with tiles covering just about every bit of space that is not actually garden. On the Terrace of the Chapel, there is an azulejo wall covering, created about 1670, representing the liberal arts. Panels with an Oriental flavor cover the lower part.

Finally, Lisbon's Avenida Infante Santo has an enormous tile mural by Sa Nogueira and another by Maria Keil, both completed in 1959. These are among the most large-scale works ever done in tile in Portugal.

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