

A Tile fantasy
Anwer Mooraj

The exhibition being held at Karachi's Mohatta Palace Museum – that somewhat austere and stern structure in faded terracotta, tucked away in the heart of Old Clifton – is one of the most impressive I have been privileged to see long time. From the moment I stepped onto the black and white tiled floor, I got a feeling of timelessness, of entering another dimension created by a sense of an almost infinite landscape of inner thought and order, which spoke of literal and symbolic grandeur that had hitherto been obscured. It was almost as if a divine projector somewhere out in space had shut down for a fraction of a second to allow a guest to absorb the most intimate and emotive personal impressions left behind by a small army of craftsmen.

The *Tale of the Tile*, as the exhibition has been named, the first of its kind in Pakistan and the eleventh at the Mohatta Palace, attempts to highlight the various ceramic traditions found in Pakistan. It was put together, after considerable effort, painstaking research and a lot of detailed correspondence and running around, by Abdul Hamid Akhund, a former secretary of culture in the government of Sindh, and Nasreen Askari, the curator of the museum. Aably assisted by Ayela Khuhro, all three worked feverishly to put the show on the road. Hameed Haroon, chairman of the board of trustees of the Mohatta Palace, played a major role in the revamping and revitalising of the museum.

In order to make the exhibition as broad based and all-inclusive as possible, relics and objets d' art had to be acquired from a number of locations. In a remarkably short time the artifacts were crated, carted, driven and flown to Karachi from the Quetta Museum, the Sindh Provincial Museum, the Department of Archeology in the Punjab, the Auqaf department of the same province, the Lahore Museum, the Department of Culture in Sindh and the National Museum of Pakistan. Some pieces were also borrowed from private collections, which included tiles, vessels, shards and calligraphic panels. The result has been a celebration of an immense and sternly powerful display of ceramic tiles, which, in a sense, depict the evolution of this art form over the centuries.

Ceramic tile work is one of the most expressive of the decorative arts and is very much a part of the architectural heritage of Islam. Examples of these skillful evocations, sometimes symbolic but always lyrical can be found in parts of Andalusia, the Mediterranean belt in North Africa, Central and South Asia. In these areas tile makers, in the spirit of rivalry or defiance to outdo their competitors in gratuitous novelty, dispersed their gifts between exquisite but simple compositions and the incorporeal harmonies that bedeck the ceilings, walls and pillars of monuments.

To make it easier for the visitor to grasp the enormity and variety of the artifacts on display, the presentation has been compartmentalized into nine sections each with its own special identity and ambience. The first room appropriately titled *Sindh: The Colours of the Heavens*, is simply dripping with jewels and gives the visitor a taste of what is to follow. Here one sees the transformation of baked earthenware into items of glazed pottery, and how glazed tiles were used as a form of architectural ornamentation. The

tiles that make up the colours of the heavens have been plucked from floors, walls and ceilings of the monuments of Sindh and exhibit their astonishing variety.

Two very different traditions are in evidence and provide an interesting contrast. The craftsmen of Multan have for centuries favoured the combination of cobalt blue fused with turquoise which appears to have become the predominant motif in the majority of monuments in the northern part of the country. The craftsmen of Hala, meanwhile, have clung tenaciously to the blend of yellow ochre and various shades of mustard. Both, in their own way, have excelled – skilful evocations, more contemplative and mystical than energetic and gestural.

The discerning viewer then begins to make interesting discoveries. The first is that ceramics are a very perishable commodity, and storage can often be a major problem. Another is that initially, potters did not sign their names and started doing so only after the arrival of the British. Also, the influence of the Greeks is unmistakable, especially when it comes to the persuasive placement of figures within spatial setting, the use of repetition and the choice of hues.

When the tiles are placed close together, like clockwork birds on a jerk of wire, they produce wonderful symmetry and continuity. One is immediately struck by the remarkable exactitude, the coherence of design, motif and colour involved in each slab, giving them an air of poignant elegy. The accuracy is awe-inspiring. It is almost as if the tiles had been manufactured by a modern machine using the latest technology rather than the tools and implements of old.

A glance of the layout plan of the museum informs the visitor that he has to turn right if he wants to enter the Imperial Patronage section which houses the Jamia Masjid of Thatta built by Shah Jahan in the middle of the seventeenth century. A number of elements distinguish this mosque, with its interlinking domes and arches, from others in surrounding areas. One is the ornamentation, which reflects a rich blend of Persian, Mughal and indigenous motifs. Another is the technique used to inset the mosaic into the brick in the domes and the squinches. This has been done so cleverly that it looks as though the mosaic had always been a part of the brick, as in a painting. And finally, there is the remarkable variation of shape and form of the decorative motif. The tiles appear in the form of circles, squares, rectangles and hexagons. Interestingly, there are no five pointed stars. The Star of David, which is formed by joining together of two triangles, also does not make an appearance.

After walking down a short corridor the visitor slips into an area identified by the alliteration, *Monarchs, Mystics and Minarets*. This section is simply inundated with references to Multan, a city whose historical importance was emphasized by its location and confluence of trade routes from Iran, Afghanistan and the sea to the west. It also became an important religious center in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD. But here, even though a deeply introspective mood appears to have suffused the exquisite work, one can't help ignoring the melancholy spirit of threatening chaos and impending doom that permeates the room.

Though Multan did not play the kind of role that Patna or Benares did in the metaphysical search for the truth, the city nevertheless became an important religious center that attracted scholars from other parts of the sub-continent and abroad. Not only

were various religious Islamic sects tolerated; there was a spirit of openness and enquiry that eventually led to the development of Sufism.

There was, however, another center of scholarship and learning early in the thirteenth century that was close to Multan and had caught the spirit of mysticism and tolerance. This was Uchh Sharif, which attracted scholars from Khurasan, Ghazni and other cities.

As this writer strolled through the rooms, trying to absorb as much as he possibly could of the wonders of Uchh and Multan, he became aware of a small recess in one of the walls and decided to investigate. The alcove with its commonality of motifs and arabesques looked a little forbidding and the dim orange lighting added to its eeriness. Actually, the recess represents a burial chamber. But as this is hardly the sort of thing one would like to add to a catalogue of artifacts, the niche has been given the innocuous title of *A Sufi's Retreat*.

The genesis of the ceramic tradition, if one can call it that, in the part of the sub-continent, which covers three provinces in Pakistan, can be found in Mehrgarh in Baluchistan, Mohenjodaro in Sindh and Harappa in the Punjab. These three areas represent the zenith of the Indus Valley Civilization that flourished between 4000 and 1500 BC. The fact that so many valuable treatises have been written by a number of scholars in English, French, Italian, German, Urdu and Sanskrit points to the special place this civilization occupied in the history of the ancient world.

One wonders where the world would be without archeologists, the detectives of the ancient world. They are the ones who wondered if there may be a possible link between the pyramids of Egypt, Mexico and Cambodia. They were the ones who pointed out that it was the Olmecs and not the Aztecs who had created those huge monuments in Mexico that still attract students by the thousands.

It was also the archeologists who did an important bit of sleuthing in Baluchistan, which not only altered traditionally held beliefs about the techniques involved in fired brick making by the settlers of the Indus Valley but also the age of civilization.

The historical view was that the Mehrgarh settlements were an offshoot of an advanced civilization from south central Asia. The French archeological mission challenged this view and by employing the sophisticated instruments and techniques available to modern archeologists, demonstrated that Mehrgarh was at least as old as some of the settlements as old as Iran or Turkmenistan. This would put the date of the Mehrgarh settlements at around 7000 BC.

The period of special interest to the collector of pottery is the one that stretches from the fourth to the first half of the third millennium BC. This period saw the launch, establishment and flowering of polychrome wares in Baluchistan and parts of the Indus Valley. In Mehrgarh excavators discovered through pure serendipity, traces of large firing areas with the whole manufacturing apparatus intact – kilns, vessels, workshops and storerooms.

These findings demonstrated how well the production of earthenware had been organized. Excavators also learned about similar advances in the production of figurines that used both human and animal motifs. There is a marked similarity between these figurines with the ones found in regions bordering Baluchistan.

“The Potter’s Atelier – Where it all began,” located at the end of the Mohatta Palace looked rather like one of those early paintings by the Dutch masters who delighted in projecting the fruits of the potter’s trade. The fire burning bright orange in the kiln, the earthenware vats and the small logs of wood gave the place a nice rustic setting.

The area that has special association for the artists is the one the visitor comes across at the end of the tour, entitled “Studio ceramics.” In this light, airy and colourful room, one sees the contributions of a number of distinguished artists: Riffat Alvi, Dabir and Talat Ahmed, Schererazade Alam, Saadia Salim, Salman Ikram, Sarah Ahmed, Shazia Zubair, Munawar Ali Syed and Nabahat Lotia.

The work that catches one’s attention is Riffat Alvi’s “Conference of the Birds” in which hundreds of figurines sit perched on a clothesline on all four sides of a square, reminding one of Alfred Hitchcock’s memorable film. Artifacts by Sara Ahmed and Schererazade Alam also compete for attention with a host of objets d’ art and relics.