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TALE OF THE TILE



The ceramic tradition of Pakistan

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The ongoing 'Tale of the Tile' showing at the Mohatta Palace Museum is a fascinating chronicle of the ceramic traditions of Pakistan. Unfortunately the Indus Valley traditions have not enjoyed the attention and focus of historiographers, photographers and art historians have lavished on the finer wares of the middle-east -- the Persian, Timurid, and Turkic traditions and the African cultures.

Perhaps not as grand as the other cultural repositories, the ceramic heritage on display is nonetheless a very interesting, informative and engaging collection. It is the outcome of diverse influences that passed through the Indus Valley and the traditions that then developed and reached a zenith because of patronage.

Seen in totality 'Tale of the Tile' is significant for three main reasons. It is a historically important artistic exhibition, it is also a visually compelling compilation of tile decoration and considering the dearth of documentation on the Indus Valley, its current sequential datum is considerable.

Mehargarh in Baluchistan, Mohenjo-Daro in Sindh and Harappa in Punjab all represent the zenith of the Indus Valley civilization - one of the oldest and greatest civilizations of the ancient past. These forgotten cities flourished for over two

millennia between 4000 and 1500 B.C. testifying to the birth, flowering and decline of a civilization that stretched over virtually the whole of Pakistan and areas beyond.



The present day borders of Sindh are not the borders we speak of when we first enter the exhibition. It starts with a map showing the surrounds of the Indus Valley, perhaps from the time when Multan and Sindh were one geographical area. The show opens with the oldest archaeological finds in pottery from Mehargarh in Baluchistan, on loan from the Quetta Museum, and finds of the French archaeological mission working here since 1974.

At Mehargarh, traces of large firing areas with kilns, vessels, remains of workshops, storerooms for equipment and finished wares indicate how the production of earthenware was organized. These objects excavated at Mehargarh highlight important links between the Indus Valley, the Iranian plateau and South Central Asia.



The Mohenjo-Daro pottery on display illustrates the use of glazed tiles as a form of architectural ornamentation. The tiles have been drawn from the floors, walls and ceilings of monuments in Sindh where their colour and decoration, akin to the colours of the heavens, were intended to be a source of inspiration and wonder for the viewer. The facade of arches from the shrine of Pir Mohammed Ashraf Shah Qureshi has been reconstructed with ceramic revetments from a mosque at the Pirís mausoleum. He was a member of the Suhrawardiya order of Sufism founded by Shaikh Shahabuddin Zakaria from Multan.

Situated at the confluence of trade routes from Iran, Afghanistan and the Arabian Sea, Multan has always been a pre-eminent city on the western reaches of South Asia. In addition to its geo-political importance it became an important religious centre in the 12th and 13th centuries. Trade flourished and links were established between South and Central Asia which influenced the entire region. Edifices with ornamentation using glazed bricks and tiles in varying shades of sky blue, cobalt blue and white became a common feature along trade routes between Dera Ismail Khan, Multan and westwards. Several buildings in and around Multan, amongst them the tombs of Yusuf Shah Gardezi and Bahauddin Zakariya were also decorated in this glazed tile ware and this exhibition has referenced these locations with meaningful displays.

From an architectural point of view, Lahore is essentially Mughal in character. Numerous gardens, tombs, mosques, and decorated public spaces like the Wazir Khan mosque, tombs of Jehangir and his viceroy etc embellished in a unique cut tile mosaic display a remarkable ceramic legacy as shown through artifacts at Mohatta.

An entire room devoted to 'Grammar of Ornament' illustrates a vast range of oriental motif and pattern peculiar to this region. Due to the Industrial revolution British crafts had declined and the British colonial administration had decided that Indian or

South Asian crafts would provide models for design and George Birdwood was sent with the specific purpose of recording these models. Illustrated pages from his journals duplicated and enlarged for enhanced viewing are displayed on the Mohatta walls. They are not just an exquisite collection of pattern and design of our region but also hybridizations of various influences that have held sway here in different historical eras. Multiple variations of the lotus flower speak of Middle Eastern, Iranian, Hindu and Chinese influences, yet the split stem scrolled leaf arabesque or full blown many petalled floral is a common motif of our design tradition. Likewise border patterns of irises, carnations and tulips have their own stories to tell but we now need to bring fresh narratives to these old tales if we are desirous of keeping them alive.

The curator, Nasreen Askari, points out that the exhibition is a significant document of centuries old art craft practices but 'the vexed question is that it is a living tradition in serious danger of extinction. What do we do about it now?' Quality has declined for sheer economic and commercial reasons. There are very few kashigars left, materials are expensive to obtain and inferior goods are produced through use of low grade materials. This alienates the elitist buyer/patron and market value deteriorates. There is a dire need for the 'in between' which can be created by intelligent reinvention of design. The transition has to take place but the job of the museum is to provide the viewer with stimuli and impetus, not with innovation. The onus to create lies with the discerning public.



Nasreen Askari also insisted on featuring contemporary ceramics as the last segment of the show. After touring through the mesmerizing ambience of the entire exhibition the final show of modernity was as disappointing as it was shocking. Unfortunately current studio pottery is so far removed from our heritage that one can only conclude that modernity has come upon us too fast and we are obsessed with it. We are not learning from our traditions and 'Tale of the Tile' makes us realize just how far removed we are from our traditions and yet how close we are too. All we have to do is look back.