

Tile Revival

A look at the secret of Iznik's colourful ceramics – and the author's own azure acquisition.

By Virginia Sheridan

It was in Istanbul that I truly became a 'blue' person, obsessed with the dominant colour of the vibrant Iznik ceramic tiles that cover the Turkish city's premiere mosques and sultans' palaces.

I would sit for hours in the Sultan Ahmed 'Blue' Mosque, awash in a sea of 20,000 handmade azure-glazed tiles so radiant they seemed illuminated from within. I had to take a copy home with me. But the tourist markets sold only lacklustre, painted imitations and the antiques shops were curiously tile-free. Why?

The lavish decorating style of the 16th-17th century Ottoman Empire sultans initially fuelled the demand for such exquisite craftsmanship. At the height of production some 300 kilns and workshops in the Turkish city of Iznik were focused on tile work – to the exclusion of more utilitarian wares. When the Empire fell, so did both ceramic production and quality control. Even the formula for how to create the vital glazes vanished. The old masters kept their complicated production techniques a secret, even from their own families.

Initially, Iznik potters were trying to create something that looked like porcelain to compete with the coveted blue and white ware imported from China at the time. They experimented with their native grayish-white clay, covered it with layers of glaze and slip (clay and water) and eventually infused it with radiant life/light in the form of crushed quartz. Almost 80% of Iznik tiles were made of this semi-precious stone. No wonder they dazzle!

Though the initial palette was only blue and white (and the designs were reinterpretations of Chinese themes), later experiments with manganese, iron and copper oxide yielded the richer palette of coral red, turquoise blue and emerald green that allowed for more intricate Islamic-style patterns.

So there I was in Istanbul, husband in tow, looking for the rose-coloured Hagia Sofia when I began feeling – or rather seeing – blue, emanating from the inside of a merchant's shop. Lustrous Iznik-style tiles for sale, could it be? Could I be arrested for taking one out of the country?

Ten cups of tea later (shopping is a slow process in Turkey), we learned that the 'new' tiles were produced by the Iznik Foundation, an organisation set up in 1993 by Dr. Isil Akbaygil with the goal of studying the old tile-making techniques and teaching



Tile purchased by author



Interior of 'Blue' Mosque

them to a new generation of artisans. Through intense archaeological research, the Foundation discovered a kiln shape that allowed for successful firing of the temperamental glazes and created a proximate recipe of metal oxides for the pigments. After two years of experimentation, assistance from universities and scientific institutes and countless broken tiles, the vibrant colours emerged once again.

Each 'modern' Iznik tile takes up to four weeks to complete. The resulting product is, in fact, so close to the original in consistency that the Iznik Foundation decided not to produce direct copies – lest they be sold as antiques. The new designs are, instead, variations on classic themes – a reverse of colours here, a blending of patterns there.

Ten more cups of tea and we finally decided on two rectangular pieces with oval edges that together formed a strong floral vine motif – predominantly blue, of course. "Ah, a very interesting purchase for the gentleman," said the mischievous salesman. "Maybe not so lucky for the lady, though. Do not hang it near your bedroom," he added cryptically.

In fact, we didn't hang those tiles for 10 years. At first we couldn't decide how to display them. Frame them and obscure the sides? Add hooks and damage the porous backs? Then we were stopped by the fear that our toddlers or earthquakes (we were living in Japan at the time) would knock them off the wall. But when we moved into a shophouse in Singapore and had a glaringly empty space over the fountain, we knew it was at last time for a tile revival.

We drank a cup of tea admiring our 'new' addition to the home. "Placing it over water is perfect," I said to my husband. "Weren't they copies of panels outside an ablution fountain at Topkapi Palace?"

"No, they were from the harem chambers," he said, smiling. "That's why the salesman said it was good for me, remember?"

A quick Google search revealed we were both wrong. Our beloved panels were modelled on originals from the Topkapi Palace Courtyard of the Eunuch!

No Iznik tiles are on view in Singapore's NHB museums, but you can see a small collection of Islamic ceramics at the Asian Civilisations Museum's West Asia Gallery. For more information on the Iznik Foundation, see www.iznik.com

Virginia Sheridan has previously been published in the *South China Morning Post* and the *Boston Globe* and is currently co-head of the ACM Docent Training Team.

Photos by Virginia Sheridan