

Sex, Lies and Ceramic Tiles

Part I

A 'Violent' Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

In her book *Furnishing Textiles*, Pamela Claburn states "The possibilities for the furnishings of a house at any time in history have depended on technical ability, fashion and practicalities of trade with foreign countries, and these three things are interlocked". It is my belief that what is true of soft furnishings is equally true of ceramic tiles.

Over the next few issues, I wish to consider these factors in some detail by looking at tiles from several key periods in the history of ceramics: Roman mosaics, Islamic tiles (Zillij and Iznik), Dutch Delft, 19th century English, and Art Deco from around the world, in particular Australia.

In the process I hope to demonstrate how tiles have served as a vehicle for chronicling of societies which produced them, revealing through colour, theme, image, application, and technical development an entire culture.

Finally, I would like to consider the contemporary Australian scene in all its diversity, and ask "What is the image of ourselves and our industry which we are fashioning for the critical gaze of posterity?" Can we learn anything from the past?"

Whether we are conscious of it or not we are all heirs of Roman civilisation, in ways too numerous to tabulate. But as speakers of English and people interested, for one reason or another, in tiles our indebtedness to ancient Rome is obvious. Obvious too should be my decision to start this investigation with them. However an immediate problem presents itself; that is, no "Why Rome? but "How Rome?" Roman civilisation spanned 1000 years and three continents. It is this sheer scale which poses the challenges for meaningful analysis. Therefore, apart from some preliminary observations about Roman mosaics in general I have confined my attention to the mosaics of North Africa between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D.

Up Pompeii

The earliest Italian mosaics followed very much in the Greek Hellenistic tradition with the same repertoire of ornamental motifs, subject-matter and over-all design. Frequently, they were copies of Hellenistic paintings or other mosaics. An outstanding example is the Alexander mosaic from the House of Faun at Pompeii. Dated c. late 2nd

century B.C. and a copy of a painting of c. 300 B.C., it displays all the skill in representing crowded composition, violent movement, figures receding into the distance and masterly foreshortening which characterised Hellenistic painting at that time. Opinion differs as to its creating, but most probably it was made locally by Greek workmen. Along with a great Nile mosaic from Palestrina, these works were rare, requiring a level of skill, width of resources and an expenditure of time and money impossible for the average commission. Standard pavements followed the convention of contemporary painting - a single scene or subject set to read logically in an illusionistic space, often an architectural setting or landscape. Subjects also mimicked the conventions of painting - mythological characters, Nilotic scenes, birds, fish and animals, actors and Bacchic figures.

The houses of Pompeii and Ostia also display black and white mosaic pavements near the front door with didactic inscriptions such as SALVE (welcome) or CAVE CANEM (beware of the dog).

Black and white figural mosaics in a silhouette style had been popular from the artistically austere Augustan period onward. From about 110 A.D. fresh life was injected into this style, with ambitious and enormously successful wall to wall compositions, relying for their effect on superb draughtsmanship. Outstanding examples include the Baths of Neptune at Ostia, and the Baths of the Seven Sages.

Into Africa

Although one of Rome's earliest provinces, Africa was not rapidly affected by Roman influence. There is relatively little archaeological material that dates from the 1st century A.D. or before, except for roads and military installations. The great period of Roman North Africa begins with the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, peaking in the early 3rd century. Politically it is evident in the increasing number of towns acquiring municipal status, and culminates with Septimius Severus, an African, becoming Emperor.

Second and third century Africa was immensely prosperous, based on the production of oil and corn. Civil wars, barbarian invasions, recession and violent inflation certainly affected Africa to some extent, but the effects were minimised due to the continued demand for its agricultural produce. Ever since the late Republic there had been huge agricultural estates in the province, however it was still predominantly an urban community. In the 4th century

Carthage was the third biggest city in the empire, just behind Constantinople. A high proportion of North African mosaics are from this period, and are situated in houses from the towns.

After private houses, public baths represent the second largest source of mosaics. There use in other forms of public building was rare. Baths are significant in that, with few exceptions, they are the only buildings where an attempt was made to employ a subject which corresponded to the function of the building: i.e. marine scenes - with real fish and fishers or fantasies of sea monsters and sea gods. Neptune was especially popular.

A major influence on the development of African mosaics was exercised by the patrons who commissioned them. The pavements which decorate their houses reflect their concerns and interests. One thing that communicates itself through the images is the 'class' to which most house owners belonged; wealthy merchants, land owners and local municipal aristocracy. Not only do we find images of the cult of Dionysus, hunting scenes with figures identified by name, scenes of activity on their country estates, floors covered in emblems of prosperity (obviously effective) and fertility (including phallic symbols), but we gain an insight into the importance these men ascribed to the games of the amphitheatre as a means of social and political image building.

The originality of the mosaicists of North Africa resides mainly in their approach to designing a floor and organising the figures: circular compositions, free distribution of large scale figures in all-over designs, compositions in registers. Together with a liking for vivid polychromy and the use of floral arabesques, these features form the basis of the North African style.

The change in the repertoire of subjects inevitably resulted in changes of compositional technique. Traditional Hellenistic methods - the emblemata panel and the medallion type (in which figures are isolated within separate frames) didn't lend themselves to the representation of realistic subjects. An alternative form of composition was necessary for the rendering of these large, energetic scenes which depicted different episodes in a single frame, and the indication of landscape and setting while at the same time avoiding the problem of an overly naturalistic treatment of three dimensional space.

The Hunt for Red Rabbit

Prior to the early 3rd century hunting scenes were almost unknown in Africa, but

from this time on they are amongst the most common subjects, as patrons insisted on having pavements which represented one of their favourite pastimes.

These mosaics reveal a significant change in attitude towards the depiction of hunting scenes; gone are the heroic prototypes, the naked gods and legendary figures, but instead we are presented with contemporary life - real people in pursuit of ordinary, small animals such as hares and foxes, using nets and dogs. The mosaics represent a delight in the rendering of realistic activities for their own sake, in naturalistic detail and narrative incident. In order to produce a greater sense of action, several different episodes are combined in one mosaic. This brings about new techniques in the use of registering and in the use of objects for their formal decorative qualities, or for their ability to suggest setting - from these techniques a new concept of space arises.

Scenes of the 'victorious hunter' are common in other parts of the Empire and often have a religious or symbolic significance: hunting is regarded as the field in which a man's VIRTUS was tested, or as an allegory of his fight against strong and hostile forces. Such an interpretation is rare in African mosaics, where hunting scenes were intended to have nothing but a realistic significance. To the African mind hunting did not appear to possess symbolic connotations, partly because of the much stronger symbolic sense which Africans attributed to the amphitheatre.

Pulp Faction

The spectacles of the amphitheatre offered the mosaicists an unrivalled supply of subjects simply by the variety of animals displayed, and the events staged. The amphitheatre mosaic from the villa at Zliten depicts the full range of gruesome activities, including wild beast fights and hunts, gladiatorial combats of every sort, condemned criminals being mauled to death by lions and leopards while musicians play in the corners. Shields, weapons and litters to carry off the dead and wounded help establish the setting - just in case there was some doubt.

The most eloquent testimony of the amphitheatre mosaics broader 'propagandist' function is provided by the mosaic of Magerius from Smirat (c. mid 3rd century). It depicts four 'venatores' in combat with leopards - all of which are named. The surface is indicated only by crude shadows and generous pools of blood from the wounded animals. The overall treatment is naturalistic, but the appearance



Above: Oceanus, Greek god of the ocean



Left: Black and white mosaics in the Baths of Neptune, Ostia (c. A.D. 140)

Below: Mosaic of Magerius, Smirat Tunisia (mid 3rd century A.D.)

of the gods Diana and Dionysus undermines this impression. Two more figures are portrayed - a boy holding a tray of money and a richly dressed man. There are two long inscriptions, and the name MAGERI repeated twice. The inscription records the generosity (sic) of MAGERIUS in staging the event and paying the venatores twice the going rate. It also records the audience's enthusiastic applause of such munificence. This mosaic does not exist in some public building for all to see, but in Magerius' own lounge room, as it were. He has chosen to decorate his floor for the edification of himself, his family and guests, his clients and posterity, leaving us a permanent record of his generosity and the public honour it has brought him. The appearance of the two deities elevates the event onto a higher spiritual plateau; their presence implies patronage of the slaughter and the location of Dionysus directly above Magerius, and his gesture towards the entrepreneur reveals that Magerius considered himself under Dionysus' especial patronage.

In Part II we will look at the conclusion of this "bloody" story and consider the ethereal delights of Islamic tiles.



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Bibliography in Part II