FROM INTERNATIONAL TIMURID TO OTTOMAN: A CHANGE OF TASTE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CERAMIC TILES

Before Iznik reached its undisputed position of prominence in the production of underglaze painted architectural tile revetments around 1550, Ottoman buildings were decorated by a technically and stylistically varied repertoire of tiles characterized by a Turco-Iranian “international Timurid” taste. Fifteenth-century Ottoman tile revetments can be ascribed to immigrant craftsmen from Iran working with local assistants. Following them were a group attached to a hitherto unknown ceramics workshop in Istanbul, headed by one of the Tabrizi master craftsmen whom Selim I had brought to his capital following a victory over the Safavid s in 1514. Identifying the output of that workshop, which was responsible for making the tile revetments for most of the imperial Ottoman buildings commissioned up to the early 1550’s, has important implications for understanding the subsequent revolution in taste and technology pioneered in Iznik.

Iznik played a relatively unimportant role in the production of architectural tile revetments before the mid sixteenth century. Neither textual sources nor recent excavations provide evidence about tile production on a large scale in that city prior to the construction of the Süleymaniye mosque in Istanbul between 1550 and 1557. The industry of fritware pottery established in Iznik around the 1470’s through Ottoman court patronage had broadened its market base from the 1510’s onward with expanded production, but not more than a few tiles can be attributed to its potters before the middle of the sixteenth century. These include the underglaze painted blue-and-white border tiles in the tombs of Şehzade Mahmud (1506–7) and Ahmed (1512–13) in Bursa which are decoratively related to Iznik pottery, but exhibit variations in both glaze composition and body structure that confirm the relative unrefinement of tile technology at that point. The group of so-called Damascus pottery, produced in Iznik between 1539 and 1560, also consists almost exclusively of ceramic vessels except for a few examples of hexagonal tiles such as the ones transferred by the Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha from another bath to the Yeni Kaplica Baths of Bursa restored in 960 (1552–53), suggesting that the manufacture of tile revetments on a large scale had not yet begun.2

Extensive tile decoration appears for the first time in the Yeşil mosque and tomb complex of Mehmed I in Bursa, built between 1419 and 1424 to commemorate the restoration of Ottoman rule following a dynastic crisis caused by Timur’s defeat of Bayezid I in 1402. The “Masters of Tabriz” who signed the tilework were supervised by the court designer Ali ibn Ilyas Ali, known as “nâkkâş ‘Ali,” who was responsible for coordinating the decorative program, which consisted of tilework, wall painting, woodwork, and stone carving.3 The sixteenth-century Ottoman biographer Taşköprülûzade states that the designer Ali, a native of Bursa, had been carried off by Timur to Transoxiana where he received his artistic training. He was the first artist to introduce painted decoration in the Timurid mode to his homeland.4 Hacı İvaz Pasha, who is identified as the supervisor of construction in the Yeşil mosque’s foundation inscription, is credited by the early-sixteenth-century historians Neşri and Aşıkpaşazade with being the first grand vizier to invite an array of skilled foreign artisans to the Ottoman court. The foreign ceramicists imported by Hacı İvaz probably produced their varied repertoire of cuerda seca, monochrome glazed, and underglaze painted blue-and-white tiles (seen on the sarcophagus of Sitt Hatun at the Yeşil tomb) in local kilns at Bursa close to the construction site.5

The “Masters of Tabriz” apparently were sent from Bursa to Edirne to decorate among other buildings the Muradiye mosque of Murad II in the 1430’s. The mosque’s cuerda seca mihrab, which closely resembles that of the Yeşil mosque, has underglaze painted blue-and-white insets forming a unified group with the underglaze hexagonal tiles decorating the dadoes. The juxtaposition of tiles in several techniques and color
schemes in the fabric of a single building leaves no doubt that they were produced simultaneously by the same ceramic workshop in local kilns. The technical examination of tiles made by the Masters of Tabriz has shown that the technology used for making cuerda seca and underglaze blue-and-white tiles in the Muradiye mosque was the same. The lime-alkali frit of these tiles differed substantially from the lead-alkali frit typical of the blue-and-white underglaze pottery of Iznik. The Tabrizi masters in full command of several tile techniques, including plain or gilt monochrome, underglaze, cuerda seca, and mosaic-faience. Except for the bannā'ī technique of glazed bricks unsuited to Ottoman stone-masonry buildings, this wide-ranging repertoire is characteristic of the work of contemporary Timurid tilemakers who similarly juxtaposed tiles of differing techniques and color schemes in the same building.

Several early-fifteenth-century Timurid buildings in Khurasan also feature underglaze painted blue-and-white tiles used here and there, along with mosaic-faience or cuerda seca tiles based on a contrasting palette of opaque yellow, green, and blue. Such underglaze painted tiles were used sparingly in Timurid public architecture, but might have been more common in the decoration of palaces, as the Chini-Khancheh pavilion built by Timur’s grandson Ulugh Beg in the 1430’s in Samarqand suggests. Excavations in 1941 at the site of this lost, porcelain-faced pavilion yielded hexagonal tiles painted in cobalt blue on a white ground, which are believed to have been imported from the Ming imperial factories, as well as local imitations. Spurred by the sudden influx of Chinese porcelain at the Timurid court following numerous exchanges of embassies with China in the early fifteenth century, such rare examples of blue-and-white underglaze painted tiles disappear from the architecture of Khurasan after the mid fifteenth century. Surprisingly, Chinese models did not have as strong an influence on the Timurid blue-and-white tiles of Khurasan as they had on the ones executed in fifteenth-century Syria, Egypt, and Turkey.

Reflecting local variants of an international Timurid taste, blue-and-white tiles of mostly hexagonal shapes found in Mamluk Syria and Egypt, as well as in the Ottoman capitals of Bursa and Edirne, appear to have been created by artists from Tabriz, the capital of the Qaraqoyunlu and Aqqoyunlu Turcoman dynasties. Compared to the tiles of the Tawrizi (i.e., Tabrizi) complex in Damascus (ca. 1430), the technical perfection of the Muradiye tiles in Edirne suggests that different groups of itinerant potters were at work. Un fortunately, the wholesale destruction of contemporary buildings in Tabriz — the only one to survive is the Blue Mosque (1465), where square blue-and-white underglaze tiles are used in conjunction with a variety of glazed tiles and mosaic-faience — makes the study of this Tabrizi tradition impossible. Its impact was still strong in the Dome of the Rock tiles, signed by Abdallah of Tabriz and produced on the order of Sultan Süleyman between 952 (1545–46) and 959 (1551–52), which combined in the same scheme tile mosaic, cuerda seca, polychrome underglaze, as well as blue-and-white underglaze tiles. As we shall see, the influence of this Tabrizi school was also felt in Istanbul up to the middle of the sixteenth century.

The international-Timurid decorative repertoire with its strong element of chinoiserie, which developed in various forms at courts from Samarqand, Herat, Tabriz, Damascus, and Cairo to the Ottoman world, continued to be influential after the fall of Constanti­nople. The masters of Tabriz appear to have moved from Edirne to Istanbul, for the two surviving poly­chrome tile lunettes in the courtyard of the mosque of Mehmed II (1463–70) which copy laborious cuerda seca tiles in the quicker underglaze technique, resemble the ones they made for the Üç Şerefeli mosque of Edirne (1437–47). The continuing impact of Timurid models is confirmed by the contemporary historian Muʿali who mentions the role of architectural decorators from Khurasan (ahl-i hunar az Khurasān zamīn) in the mosque complex of Mehmed II. The ceramicist (ṣīnak) Shujaʿī, whose property near that mosque is cited in Mehmed II’s waqfiyya, might well be one of these Timurid artists who experimented with new methods and materials under Ottoman patronage as exemplified by the unprecedented polychromy of the underglaze tiles in Mehmed’s mosque.

An undated Persian document recently published by Kirmi confirms the activity of a different group of “tilecutters from Khurasan” (kāshi-tarāshān-i Khurasān) in Istanbul who beg for more work after having completed a pavilion (gaṣr) for Mehmed II. Their Timurid-flavored tilework is preserved in the Činili Köşk at the Topkapi Palace (1472) where the bannā’ī technique is encountered for the first time in Istanbul. Since there are no other preserved examples of comparable tilework, these Khurasani tilecutters were apparently unsuccessful in obtaining the new job for which they had petitioned; they must have returned to their homeland soon after. These itinerant tile mosaicists had probably been invited specifically for the Činili Köşk project.