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IN THE SMALL TOWN OF HALLE IN SIND, PAKISTAN

Tile making in the Middle East and parts of South Asia has a long history and a very distinct style. The tiles have many uses but one of the most dramatic and best known is in the decoration of mosques. In the small town of Halle (Hall-ah) near Hyderabad there are many potteries producing mainly tiles and some plates, jugs, bowls, etc. The following set of slides shows the inside of one of these potteries and the process used to produce the tiles. Because of the poor lighting inside the building, some of the steps will be described without a slide for illustration.

1) On the day of our trip to Halle we entered the town through the archway you see in this slide. You will notice that the archway, appropriately, is decorated with glazed tiles.

2) The main street of the town was filled with carts, people, pi-(pie) dogs and only a very occasional car. The men you see here are wearing the customary style of clothing which covers the body completely for protection from the sun but is also very loose and therefore cool. Since the province of Sind is largely a desert area, these clothes are an important way of keeping "well" - by avoiding sun burn, sun stroke, and dehydration. The pi-dogs you see are the semi-wild dogs that live in every town and city but generally belong to no one. They act as scavengers. In the very front of the slide you can see the tail end of a vendor's cart that is piled high with aluminum cooking pots and pans.

3) Now we are inside the courtyard of one of the many pottery factories in Halle. Some of the potters and their apprentices have kindly lined up for a picture. They are standing with their backs to the sheltered area where the tile painting is done and the finished tiles are stored.

4) The process begins with the preparation of the clay. To the sides of this clay pit you can see the piles of dry clay lumps. You will notice them in a number of the other slides, also. These clay lumps are put into the pit with water and left to stand for weeks, with more water being added as necessary. Gradually the lumps will liquefy and the micro-organisms in the clay will flourish and grow until the clay is "workable". For making the tiles, the potters will take the clay in a fairly liquid state and form it in molds. For plates, bowls, etc. they allow more of the water to evaporate so the clay can be formed on a potter's wheel.

5) The day we were visiting a whole series of tiles had already gone through the molding process. So in our photographs we must jump ahead to the point where the tiles are unmolded. When the tiles are fairly dry, what is called "leather", they are set up in a beehive formation to completely dry. Setting them up this way allows air to reach the maximum surface area so they dry evenly and without warping. The white tiles lying flat on the ground show the next step in the process. Here the completely dry tiles have been washed with a white "slip", a creamy, liquid white clay, so that the background of the design will be white.

6) This is another view of the courtyard, taken from the top of the kilns, showing the array of tiles making their different patterns.

7) The next step is the tracing of the pattern onto each of the tiles, getting them ready for the painters. Each of these tiles will have the same design and the design is set up so that it creates a continuous pattern as your eyes travel across the surface of the tiles. You will see exactly what I mean in the slide after next. The man sitting here fits a pattern stencil, made on a sheet of very heavy paper by pricking small holes through the paper along the outlines of the design, on the tile. He lines it up carefully and then gently "pounces" the tile with a cloth bag full of fine charcoal dust. The dust goes through the small holes so that when the stencil is removed the outlines of the pattern will be in black on the white surface of the tile. Certainly this will make the next step much easier for the painter.

8) A close up of the "pounced" tiles shows you the outline of the pattern.

9) The actual painting is done inside the shelter where it was too dark to take photographs, so I asked if a few tiles could be brought outside for you to see. The tile in front of the man in white has just the dark blue painting done. You have noticed, I'm sure, that the dark blue is gray - that's because the tile must be "fired" or baked in order for the blue color to appear. The middle tile shows you the green (orange) and turquoise (light gray) areas painted in. They will finish this step by covering the entire surface of the tile with a clear, shiny glaze. I had the potters put a finished tile in the line so you can see what the colors will become after they have been fired. Also, you can see how the designs fit together from one tile to the next. This pattern is used for a border so it only "fits" on two sides. If it was a pattern for a wall area, it would fit on all four sides.

10) Once the tiles are painted and glazed, they are ready to be fired in the large kilns that stand at the back of the courtyard. Here you see the side view of two kilns, one heating and one empty and cool, ready to be filled with a new load of tiles. In the background you can see the mold frames hanging on the wall, more piles of dry clay lumps and tiles recently molded and set out to dry.

11) This shows the loading hole at the top of the kiln and the ladder which leads into the firing chamber. The tiles will be carefully stacked around the walls of the chamber from bottom to top. Then the ladder will be removed and the fires started.

12) Here you can see the whole kiln as it is fired and the opening where the fuel is fed into the flames. Depending on the type of clay and glazes, the kiln will burn for several hours or several days. Then, of course, it will be several more days before the kiln and all its contents are cool enough for unloading.

13) When that moment comes - this is what reappears through the loading hole!

14) But where and how are all these tiles used? They are found in many places. Here, if you look very carefully, you can see they are covering the ceiling inside this house. The front of the house is covered with whitewashed, decorative brickwork, but if you peer in through the open shutters of the windows, you can just make out the tiled ceiling.

15) This is a wind-catcher - a type of passive, energy saving, air conditioning very common on houses in the Sind desert. This small, peaked structure covers a hole in the roof of a house and is set to catch the prevailing winds of the area. Air moves down the shaft and into the rooms below. At the bottom of the shaft, bricks are kept wet so that moisture is also added to the dry air as it enters the house. I took this picture for two reasons - to show you a different, and very ancient form of air conditioning and because the ceiling of this wind catcher is lined with tiles, unfortunately, the shadows were such that the tiles didn't show up in the picture.

16) These are the markers in a Muslim graveyard. At the end of many of the graves are five-sided tiles with sayings from the Koran written on them. These are also produced by the pottery factories in Halle.

17 & 18) When we think of these tiles, we usually think of Muslim mosques. Here you see tiles being used to decorate a famous mosque - the Shah Jahan Mosque in Hyderabad. They form borders, arches and fill large areas with their delicate trceries of interlocking patterns. They combine geometrics and arabesques, subtle pattern changes and cool soft colors so that coming in from the hot sun and arid austerity of the desert all around, the visitor suddenly finds oneself cooled and rested and at the same time entranced by the intricate patterns.