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The interpretation of architectural objects in plastic arts, “encaustic tiles in Cyprus”

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Abstract

This study was conducted in hope of increasing the awareness of Cypriots on encaustic tiles which are one of the most important elements of architectural heritage and thus help to protect this heritage from disappearing. Because of modernisation and developments in interior decorating, encaustic tiles have started to be forgotten. In this study, literature researches have been carried out about many things from interior decorating to encaustic tiles. Photographs were taken in houses where encaustic tiles have been used. Houses in North Cyprus were investigated with data from received speculations and with random sampling. The results were used to make canvas works and prepare an exhibition. Results indicated two important measures to protect this architectural heritage from disappearing in the face of developed technology and the changed world as in previous historical times. One of these measures is increasing the awareness of public on the importance of encaustic tiles and the other is increasing the number of firms producing encaustic tiles and providing their sustainability.

Keywords: Encaustic tiles, Cyprus, Architecture, Heritage, Art, Interior Design.

1. Introduction

When looking at the Island of Cyprus, it seems nearly impossible to assume that the subject of thesis has not been affected from the historical process, cultural change and the many civilisations that have passed from the island and that this cultural heritage has not been changed with each new coming civilisation. Coloured floor tiles have also been investigated socially and culturally throughout this process of change. “For centuries, the Island of Cyprus has been host to important civilisations; it is a piece of land which holds within its body continual values that have accumulated throughout the historical process until our day. Under different administrations for centuries, it has been under the influence of many cultures and civilisations and from the past to today it has become a mosaic of cultures. In successive order, being Lusignan, Venetian, Ottoman, British and today’s administration, different rules and cultures have influenced the island in different ways.” (The Handbook of Cyprus, 2007, 1)

“There are many monumental constructions built on the island, examples of civil architecture with architectural and artistic value, and its street texture of organic structure, not to forget the many uninflected and authentic settlements that make up this texture.”

In these places of settlement and site specific constructions we notice that the floor tiles come forth as elaborate and eyecatching examples of decorations with their original texture. Villages and cities, besides their similarities, with their unique physical and architectural characteristics, all have identities. As an example, it can be observed from the marbles also that every street and every family’s living space have within them their own unique decorative characteristic. “In houses as places of settlement, one of the important architectural elements which emphasise
identity is ‘Coloured Floor Tiles’. In the south and north, floor tiles have become a symbol of the Cyprus house and the street texture in regards of interior architecture and can even be considered to carry antique value. The process and making being a difficult one, this craft, although continues to exist today, with modernism and the development in the field of decoration has been forgotten and faces risks of disappearing.” (The Handbook of Cyprus, 2007, 5)

There are two general problems that make this research significant. These are:

a) There are no documents to provide information on the coloured floor tiles of Cyprus;

b) That the coloured floor tiles being an important part of the architectural heritage of Cyprus are beginning to disappear.

1.2 Purpose

With the development of modern technology, our historical artefacts and cultural heritage have in time lost their old usage necessity, leaving their place to the endless opportunities offered by technology. Therefore, the uses of these floor decoration elements that once marked the period and were highly preferable has gradually decreased and now face the danger of disappearing. Although the wide range of alternatives produced by developed firms in the field have pushed us to forget our historical heritage, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that research and work in the field will to some degree reveal the relationship between the art and technology. Besides the architecture of Cyprus, in other Mediterranean coasts, Istanbul, Safranbolu, Salonica, Italy, Spain and Argentina, it is also possible to find examples of floor tiles where the making and technique depends entirely on human power and creativity. As a result, with the development of industry and technology, it appears that the aim should be to get society to use and reinterpret this forgotten cultural heritage again.

The aim of this research is to re-interpret an architectural heritage which has begun to disappear, in the field of the plastic arts. In these lines, to put together an exhibition of ‘The Interpretation of Floor Tiles with Plastic Values’, which will be an effective way to emphasise the importance of these values. Also, researches, articles, theoretical detums have been collected on this subject. For the theoretical research the archives of the Eastern Mediterranean Library, the Near East Library, the National Libraries of South and North Cyprus, Department of Antiquities and Museums were investigated. Cyprus houses have been visited and tile examples found within have been photographed in order to create visual documentation. With the help of the collected visual and theoretical detums, floor tiles were interpreted within the medium of plastic; three dimensional experiments were conducted and brought to conclusion.

Method

Researches, articles, theoretical detums have been collected on this subject. For the theoretical research the archives of the Eastern Mediterranean Library, the Near East Library, the National Libraries of South and North Cyprus, Department of Antiquities and Museums were investigated. Cyprus houses have been visited and tile examples found within have been photographed in order to create visual documentation. Within the scope of possibilities, conversations with real owners of the houses were put together as interviews and used. Floor tiles examples found in the Museum of Cyprus and the Museum of Leventis, after inquiry of the resources, were again used in the thesis.

Results

1.3. The Definition of Coloured Floor Tiles

Coloured floor tiles were discovered towards the end of the 19. Century and at that time were used as a new means of decoration which required no method of cooking. (Navarro, 2006) In general, marbles are the stones that are formed when under heat and pressure limestone and dolomitic limestones undergo metamorphosis and re-crytalise to gain a new structure. In industrial sense; all types of greywacke/rock which have a commercial value, as well as can be cut and polished are given the name marble. Using types of marble of different colour and construction characteristics as a means of decorative cover stone in interior and/or exterior surface cover is a very common practice. Taking its name “commercially” and from places marble is found, from its colour or from the marble’s
actual quality, marbles constitute all types of stone that can be cut and polished. Besides the real marble, among the the well polished limestone, travertine, serpentint, onyx marbel, dolornite, granite, diabase, basalt, slate, sandstone, tectonic breccia and conglomerate are also included within this definition. (The Handbook of Cyprus)

Figure 1. Cross and star motifs on tiles.

1.2. The Places of Use for Coloured Floor Tiles

When looking at decorative architecture in general, the first examples are seen in Egypt in 4000BC. Egyptians covered the walls of their temples with coloured, glazed plate. (Fawcett, 1998) Since the beginning of the Muslim world, porcelain has played a significant role in decorative architecture; a similar application did not take place in Europe. The common use of decorative cover materials did not occur in Europe until the second half of the 12. Century. And from this time onwards it remained nearly always limited with apholsters. (Herbert and Huggins, 1995) The production of the first examples of tile begins with limestone. These were used in the floor decoration of palaces, churches, monastries and rich merchant houses. At this time, especially in countries like Italy and France, where the Roman tradition conveyed, floor decoration continued with mosaic. These mosaics were made with the unchanged technique of small stone cubes and marble plates being used in alternate. No objection was seen in using sacred scenes in these decorative apholsters. (Gezgin, 2007)

In the field of historical floor covers, one of the most extensive model books is C. A. d’Aviler’s “Cours Complet d’Architecture” which was published in France in 1691. In his work, that he wrote after spending five years in Rome, D’Aviler, describes many Roman floor designs and gives practical suggestions for construction. The seven and eight-sided, wide, flat stone covers were suggested for halls and dinner rooms. The seven-sided tiles that D’Aviler had introduced and which had initially originated in Rome were used as a popular item of flooring for entrance halls throughout Europe. (Fawcett, 1998) France started using parquet in the 17. Century; the parquet designs used for the Versailles castle were derived from the works of Serlio and Palladio; becoming a standard item of flooring in the French castles of the 17 and 18. Century. (Gezgin, 2007)

1.2.1. The Ways of Using Coloured Floor Tiles in Cyprus

The majority of the coloured floor tiles are found in the Walled-City region of South and North Nicosia. (Arabahmet, KuruÇe, Çağlayan, Selimiye). In addition to these, similar examples are seen in certain villages and settlement places located on the coastal region. (Koruçam, Lefka, Kyrenia-the old Turkish neighbourhood, L Gupta and Bellapais). The floor covers in the old houses of Nicosia are mainly made of natural stone, mosaic and timber. The common usage however, is natural stone and mosaics. Timber has become a rarely used material in floor cover today. It is known that some of the mosaic floor tiles that were used in Nicosia had come from Italy, and that some had been produced in Cyprus. These decorative floor tiles are found in approximately 50 houses in Nicosia. These tiles are generally used in the main entrance and living room areas. Whereas, painting moulds in order to create colourful motifs is another method used in the houses of Nicosia. (Old Marbles in Nicosia, 2000, Interior Decoration)
1.3. Reasons of Using Floor Tiles

Floor tiles, besides their suitable usage characteristics, are a decorative tool which take into consideration the physical, aesthetic, and architectural qualities and desires of a space. (Herbert and Huggins, 1995) As aesthetics is important for the physiologically and psychologically well being of humans, the importance of finding ways to make the environment “livable” and more pleasing through aesthetic approaches should be understood by the architects and designers. The understanding of aesthetics also assists them to discover these ways as considerable factors contributing to the acceptable standard of living for people and how to solve the problems to make the visually pleasing environments. (Gabr, 2009)

The main reason floor tiles, which were generally found in the entrances of houses, were used was that they were seen as a possible alternative decorative element to carpets or ‘kilim’s. When the climate of Cyprus are taken into consideration, summer lasting longer than the other seasons of the year, is another reason as to why floor tiles are preferred. The floor tiles that were frequently seen in the greeting rooms or ‘verandah’s located at the entrance parts of the houses were, apart from its practical use also used as a symbol to underline the social status of the family. Among the houses which were investigated, it can be noted that the tiles that were seen bear connection with the exterior architectural construction. The simplicity of the tiles or the elaborate decorations it possesses is parallel to the largeness of the house and its wealth. The motif used and the richness of colour shows difference depending on the wealth of the family living inside the house. It can be seen that the motifs used in flooring for more modest and middle class households are plainer and quiet and that in the houses of wealthy families the tile decorations are more elaborate, fancy and spread over a wider space. Whereas, within the walled city of Nicosia, in houses located in the Arabahmet region, the ‘cross’ symbol has been used heavily as a religious motif. In the Çağlayan, Selimiye and other regions geometrical shapes are seen more, whereas in places of settlement close to the church and religious spaces the influence of religion on decoration is more noticeable.

When tiles are examined in regards of their characteristics, the frequency of the use of motifs and their characteristics can be listed as follows; geometrical shapes, stylised flower patterns, and lastly, though very rare, specially made animal and human figure motifs. The most frequently used colours being; maroon, green, pink, yellow, brown, cream, grey, black and white. Additionally, though not many, red, blue, orange and purple coloured examples were also seen. Square tile surfaces are approximately 20cm x 20cm in size. On surfaces which have an axis running through the measurement of 11.5cms has been used. (Navarro, 2006)

1.4. Types of Floor Tiles

In the old houses of Nicosia, there are tiles with natural and geometrical motifs which are dark red, brown, white and green in colour. The main shapes used for the geometrical motifs are circles, triangles, squares, curves and stars. Flower and leaf motifs are also frequently seen. In floorings usually 4 tiles are put together to create the main motif. However, the joining of them all creates the design. The sides of the main design are usually made up from geometrical motifs. The sides are usually constructed in the forms of a recurring linear chain. At the corner of the tiles, the angle of the motifs change and the feeling of depth, continuity are formed. In the old houses of Nicosia the use of baseboards, that ensure the transition between the flooring and the wall have also been seen.

Figure 2. Cross and star motifs on tiles.
2.1. The Analysis of Floor Tile Motifs

The motifs used in tiles are “the motifs that make up the main composition” and “the border motifs”. More than one tiles come together to make up a composition and because one single tile is only a piece of the general composition, the tile motif and composition can be described together. Therefore the main motifs can be grouped as seen below.

2.2. Organic Motifs

Floor tiles which have various stylised flower motifs are the most frequently seen examples of organic motifs. These motifs have been worked on piece by piece to create a whole. Therefore every marble group constitutes one pattern.

These are the most frequently used types of flower motifs;

Stylisedflower /vegetalmotifs, four-leaved clover, carnation motif, lotus flower, almond motif, leaf motif, cross motif (the cross motif is used both organically and geometrically.)

2.3 Geometrical Motifs

It is the type of motif used especially to create depth and three dimensional effects in tile design. These motifs aim to create a feeling of depth on the floor by connecting 1 or 2 different geometrical shapes at different axis. Geometrical motifs were usually used in small and narrow spaces to make the place seem more wide and deep.

Frequently used geometrical motifs are as follows; Eight-Sided Star, Equilateralquadrangle, Triangles, Honeycombhexagon, Lattice motif, Rectangle, Intersectingquadrangle, Square form compositions, Cube form compositions, Diamondshape motif, Parquetlookingcomposition, Star motif, Cross motif, Latticeadornedcircle.
3.1. The Interpretation of Floor Tiles with the Medium of Plastic

When the plastic values of the Cyprus floor tiles are observed, its similarity to the Art Nouveau movement can be seen explicitly.

3.1.1. The Art Nouveau Movement

It is an art movement where elegant decorative ornaments come forward and curves, as well as vegetal patterns are frequently used. It can be said that its roots go back to the London based Arts & Crafts Movement. It has affected Europe and America. The movement – influential towards the end of the 19. century and beginning of the 20. century – was named ‘Yeni Sanat’ (New Art) or ‘1900 Sanat’ (1900 Art) in Turkey; as well as various names regionally in many European countries. In line with these different names, changes in practical qualities have also been observed. Modern Style, Yellow Book Style, Fin de Siecle Style, Jugendstil, Secession Style are examples to these regionally used names. Architectural developments are more evident during the first stages of the movement. (http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_Nouveau)

3.1.2. Connecting with the Art Nouveau Movement;

Antoni Gaudi has created the first examples for this movement using colourful surfaces, wavey forms, plenty of decoration and organic motifs in his works. It is an art movement where elegant decorative ornaments come forward and curves, as well as vegetal patterns are frequently used. Architectural developments are more evident during the first stages of the movement. Vegetal motifs, female figures, curving lines have been used in all fields’ influences by the movement. When we look at the world art movements, Art Nouveau period artists have used motif and decorative images differently in their work. These motifs sometimes appear as pictoral and sometimes as decoration intended products. In this sense, similarities and overlaps are seen between works made in marble and floor decorations. Characteristics of the art nouveau movement and its decorative examples are seen in the works of the artists listed below.

Examples to floor, wall, and decorative style works of art carried out at different periods of time by many world famous artists such as Alphonse Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley, Gustav Klimt, Henry Van de Velde and Antonio Gaudi. (http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_Nouveau)

3.1.3. Marble Design and Glass Examples Made in Connection with the Art Nouveau Movement:

These works; which are like glass decorations, where curves and vegetal patterns are frequently used and elegant decorations come forward constitute an important part of the movement. The places of use for glass decorations are mostly church and window decorations. In the work, colourful motifs and curves are used and again they are used to create a main pattern; relating back to the marble motifs. Such as the frequent use of unique motif and decoration in his work. The artist has emphasised motif and decoration in most of his work and reflected this style in nearly all of his art works.

Discussion

4.1. The Expression of an Architectural Element using Plastic Medium

“The Coloured Floor Tiles of Cyprus”

The square, although expressing a static position, guaranteeing a fast and strong production has been a preferred form in flooring. From the square which is taken as the base of a fixed structure, curving movements widening from the interior to the exterior, as well as around them is the trend of system to chaos. Abandoning the two-dimensional status of the floral or geometrical forms used in tiles, the aesthetic result that was desired was the dynamic process of it transforming into a three-dimensional construction. Going beyond being a surface that can be walked on, these forms, attaining a volume that integrates with the space, enables the possibility of reaching an understanding of art which resembles Lucio Fontana’s ‘spaceconcept’. Searching for depth in surface and motion in mass, the results Lucio Fontana attained in his own work has been tried to be reached in the study conducted. (The Fontana, Barbara Hess, Taschen)
When the ‘square’ is taken into consideration as the symbol of a minimalised architectural space, its relationship with the sprawling forms produced inside it is not the relationship of a simple frame and its content; on the contrary, the square gains value as being a cache memory for the movements that emerge within its own boundaries. While in every square a motion, in every motion a kinetic process of spreading is experienced, the nutation of the space towards a physical reality resembles the transition from the single cell (square room) structure to the multiple space structure found in Ancient Greek architecture. The dynamic relationship of the circles and squares of geometry taking form in architecture is no coincidence. The relationship of the square and sprawling form underlines the relationship between static and dynamic forms. With the square indicating a trustworthy structure in regards to creating a focus of strength and fixation, and with the sprawling forms express a movement that makes reference to reproduction and changes; create an aesthetic for the works being carried out.

![Figure 7. Illustrate tile design on canvas.](image)

This study is an understanding of art which, like research and experiment builds itself upon two feet; an understanding that puts concept and style equally at its center. Not only to tell, but to form the reasons of production on understanding; the decision to put forth such a work was made as it overlaps with the search of an understanding of contemporary art. With the data collected, the reality that a work of art is at the same time also an item of knowledge has been desired to be emphasised. It can easily be noted that the resulting works also resemble—in a way— the soft bodied sculptures of the sixties. It has resulted as an experimental study which puts forth the understanding that sculptures need not only be made out of the carving of hard materials but can also be made from soft materials that give the feeling that volume can be changeable when touched by a human hand.
Conclusion and Recommendations:

Culture as a concept in correspondence to humankind, is a system of meaning and value which has been created over the course of history. It is a system of beliefs and rituals that a group of people have been using to understand organise and structure their individual and collective lives. These rituals can sometimes exist abstract and concretely within the communities, whereas other communities and groups in the process of change can be left with their influence. The important point being the cultural heritage of values left from one community to the other. As a result of the thesis study carried out, it is important to be aware of the cultural heritage/s left to our island throughout history by different civilisations and to keep them alive. As well as every historical heritage directing a country’s culture and future, its connection with cultural identity is also vast. These values earned to the country will play an important role in enlightening future generations. This research will also prove a beneficial document if used as a reference in art and art related lessons. The importance of culture and heritage in art education and visual design lessons makes it a beneficial reference if earned to education. At the same time it helps keep the importance of cultural values and the possibilities of their use in focus for future generations. It also draws attention to the aesthetic styles of local architectural street texture and interior decoration elements.

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