

A FINE EXAMPLE OF XIXth CENTURY TILE FLOORING PRESERVED IN THE MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF MURCIA. AN EXAMPLE OF SAFEGUARDING AND TRANSFER

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Abstract.

The Museum of Archaeology in Murcia, holds an interesting and fine example of decorated Valencian tile flooring from the XIXth century. Coming from a noble residence in the city of Murcia, it was acquired and transferred for its safe preservation to this institution in 1967, before the building that housed it fell into neglect and dereliction. It forms an early example not only of the artistic - historic value of this type of work but also of conservation in the Murcian region. The procedures for the removal, transfer and reinstallation of the tile flooring were done in accordance with the criteria of the time. It was relocated on one of the walls of the hall of the building in keeping with traditional systems which could possibly be revised at present, although which in no way lessen the importance of this type of initiative directed at safeguarding and preserving tile work of such expanse and size from the past.

Original site and origins of the floor tiles.

The beautiful examples of ceramic tiling, the subject of this paper, were originally found situated in a XIXth century building at number 8, Ceballos Street in the city of Murcia. The building was of a historicist, eclectic style and it had a plain facade with two floors, a main floor and an upper floor. This was emblazoned on the outside, on the part of the angle at about the level of the noble floor with the coat of arms of the original founders and it also possessed great balconies decorated with fine mouldings and bordered lintels with iron railings (Photograph 1.). This mansion was the residence of Don José Braco, a Neapolitan, who settled in Murcia and married Doña Dolores Lopez de Vizcaya in the same city. Their descendants lived in the house up to a few decades ago. When they abandoned it, the building was demolished without permission.

The rich interior decoration of the mansion was embellished by the beautiful ceramic flooring mentioned, which is the subject of this work, in one of its most important rooms.

The tiling was laid in the great hall on the main floor of the building and it occupied the whole rectangular surface of the room.

This ensemble of decorated ceramic tile flooring is an excellent example of Valencian tile work from the past. It was an artistic and industrial demonstration whose historical importance surpassed its own geographical territories, thanks to the business and commerce links that it had with the whole of Spain, exporting beautiful ceramic products for cladding architectural interiors. From the Baroque period up to the XIXth Century, the Valencian ceramic artists designed and produced beautiful tile floorings in their workshops, which through their artistic quality travelled far beyond the frontiers of their place of origin. The traditional links between the Kingdoms of Valencia and Murcia gave rise to the fondness, in Murcia, for covering the rooms of numerous mansions with colourful floor tiles and for this reason important samples of Valencian tile work reached this city. The decorated and glazed floorings of such origin go back as far as the XVIIIth Century in Murcia and throughout the XIXth Century they became more widely used. These artistic industrial products prevailed in Murcia on account of the thermal insulation that they provided in a region with a warm climate and also because their colourful, attractive ornamental features matched the Baroque temperament of the South East. The reason for this glazed tile floor being in a noble residence of Murcia can be explained by the fluid commercial exchange that existed between both regions from times past.

Only very recently has the antique tile floor begun to be appreciated as it so rightly deserves. Unfortunately, however, many fine examples have disappeared with the demolishing of the buildings or were lost by the new fashion of replacing tile floors with new materials. For this reason the conservation of this great tile work is an exception especially when we take into account the numerous examples which have already been lost.

Period - iconography - style of flooring.

These tiles of Valencian origin belong to the Nineteenth Century and although they have not been exactly dated, we can tell from their style and characteristics they are likely to be from the middle XIXth Century. In this ceramic flooring an interesting composition is represented, in the centrepiece the figure of the God Apollo appears surrounded by a floral ribboned medallion. All around the edge runs a great vegetative border with beautiful ornamental motifs of scrolls, flowers, urns and bouquets that link four allegoric representations of the Seasons of the year in the respective corners, each of them in its own surrounding ornamental border linked by interesting garland patterns and various decorative elements. All this is surrounded by a blue ribbon running around the perimeter that accentuates the soft colourful tones interspersed with figures and patterns. The style is reminiscent of the Baroque period from the types of figures and the use of floral borders running round the outer edge but from its general composition it belongs more appropriately to that of a late Imperial style characterised by the neatness and order that the Neoclassic style imposed. (Photographs 2 to 4).

Characteristics and state of preservation.

The dimensions are 10.65m in length by 4m in width, equalling 42.6 square metres. Each tile measures 0.20 x 0.20m and therefore there are 25 pieces in each square metre, which make up a total of 1.065 tiles. All of them were arranged in a rhomboid shape.

The technique for the making of the floor tiles is the classic one, fired clay, suitably

prepared base, with the surface of the tile receiving the required ornamental pictorial decoration, carried out by hand, then undergoing a second firing that firmly fixed the paints and supplied the glaze coating.

As to the state of preservation in 1961 of the tile flooring in the above-mentioned residence according to a study carried out by Don Manuel Jorge Aragoneses, scholar researcher and at the time the Director of the Museum of Archaeology of Murcia¹, this ceramic ensemble was found slightly sunken in the centre as the beams from the lower floor of the building had warped. In fact his exact words are as follows: «the surface of the tile floor is slightly sunk due to the fact that the wooden beams that supported the base of the floor had given way.» This author also gives us interesting details about the state in which various tiles from the set were found at the beginning of the seventies, «some tiles in the upper part of the medallion and in the centre of the south floral border appear to have been replaced by modern tiles. However their substitution would not be difficult as almost all the missing pieces, perhaps since the renovations in 1884, had been placed at the threshold of the west balcony of the same room hidden under a layer of blue paint.»²

The concern that this scholar dedicated to the work at the time is quite surprising and even more so, if we go back to the time when awareness, care and safeguarding of our Cultural and Artistic Heritage, especially in reference to the minor and decorative arts, were still incipient in this country. Moreover his concern is striking if we take into account that artistically decorated tiles were considered in many cases as semi-industrial elements that were purely practical and functional.

Indeed, and as a testimony to this is the fact that the «Central Institute for the Restoration of Works of Art, Ethnology and Archaeology» an organisation that watches over the Protection and Conservation of Cultural Wealth was founded in 1961, a time when concern for the legacy of our ancestors became officially known with the creation of the above institution in Madrid. It seems quite significant that in that very same year the call for attention in the field of tile work coincided with the creation of the said official organisation.

Procedures for the removal and transfer of the tile flooring.

For apparently purely economical motives, the owners of the building, who no longer lived there, decided to sell this magnificent flooring around 1967. It was at that time when the above-mentioned Director of the Museum of Archaeology of Murcia who, for many years beforehand, had made its existence and artistic interest known, having studied and included it in the publication mentioned, and who had carried out the necessary formalities for its purchase on behalf of the previous Ministry of Education and Science, Directorate General of Fine Arts, Buildings and Works so that it could be transferred and installed in the Museum.

After the purchase and once its removal from its original site was decided the operations for the lifting, transfer and relocation were carried out by the appointed construction company of Murcia owned by Don Nicolás Yañez Villar in 1967.³

¹ M.J. Aragoneses, «Pavimentos decimonónicos de azulejería valenciana en Murcia y su provincia», in the magazine *Murgetana*, C.S.I.C. Academia Alfonso X, no. XVII, Murcia, 1961, pp. 29-45.

² For both quotes see note 1, pp. 38-39.

³ A copy of the «General Estimate», drawn up by the company involved and dated April 1967, was kindly made available to me. It indicates the various sums assigned for the different operations, such as the amount of 16,100 pesetas, which was earmarked for lifting the tiling from the floor. The documents were kindly supplied by the builder Don Edelmiro Yañez García.

The initial removal procedure consisted in lifting each of the 1065 tiles one by one, which gives us an idea of the extent of the operation. This work, which a skilled mason patiently carried out with the aid of two labourers⁴ took approximately one month to complete. The pieces were firmly fixed to the floor with common lime «de bolo» and sand, making the removal procedure slow and laborious. Great care was taken not to damage the tiles during the operation. After being lifted from the floor, all remaining original mortar was wiped off and cleaned and the tiles were conveniently numbered on the surface, so that the pieces could later be reinstalled more easily.

When this operation was finished, all the tiles were packed into 20 wooden boxes, which according to the statements in the original documents, were specially prepared for the transfer of delicate objects.⁵ The numbered pieces were placed with great care, between abundant layers of straw before transferring them to the Museum of Archaeology. The final place had already been chosen in the building. This was one of the walls of the great hall or vestibule, specifically the south wall. The surface of this ornamental wall corresponded perfectly in size to the dimensions of the tiling and therefore its placement there was considered ideal.

Installing the tiles in their new enclave.

In another great hall of the Museum of Archaeology, the entire set of tiles was loosely arranged on the floor, in order to make a pre-setting layout that would help give an idea of its final relocation. When the great ceramic puzzle had been laid in order, they started to prepare the wall so that it could fulfil its new mission of being able to support the tiles. Therefore the total space was measured, marking the outside boundary lines, especially above, below and to the left-hand side as the right-hand side was very near the corner angle.

Then the chipping of the wall, which was similar to the other walls in the room -i.e. plaster covered with paint- began until they reached the bare brick.⁶ When the dust was removed, the surface of the wall was moistened, and following this, a first layer or coating of a mixture of clay and rough black plaster was applied to the wall, so that the wall remained rough and scratched. Therefore the roughness would help the ceramic tiles to adhere better when placed on the wall.

Given that the original layout of the tiles was rhomboid, which made their installation slightly more complex, a system was devised that would facilitate this procedure. The system was the following, a timber frame or grid made of tight string was set, which followed the rhomboid pattern. It was suspended 10 centimetres above the surface so that it would not obstruct the fixing of the tiles. This was held at the edge by a wooden frame.

The tiles were placed on the wall one by one, starting from the bottom upwards and from right to left, calculating their position by sight because not all the tiles were exactly the same size. The process consisted of applying coloured mortar and white plaster to the wall and then installing each previously moistened tile on this surface. Mortar was made for each tile because in that way the correct setting point was obtained. The mortar was made up of one part clay and two parts plaster. After placing each tile in position it was

⁴I owe some interesting contributions for this study to this labourer, called Angel Pacheco, since he remembered many different details of the process. I should like to express my gratitude to him here.

⁵Explicitly stated in the «General Estimate», mentioned in note 3.

⁶For this specific wall preparation operation in the Museum, a sum of 6,500 pesetas was allocated according to the «General Estimate» of April, 1967.

adjusted by pressing and hitting gently with the fist until it reached the desired level. This was done one by one.

The labourers supplied the pieces, they moistened them and left them steeping in water. They prepared the mortar and gave them to the mason who set them in rows. The rhythm was slow due to the meticulousness of the work (about two rows of tiles a day) and on reaching a greater height a scaffolding was needed to continue the work and later a higher scaffolding was used to reach the upper area.⁷ These operations lasted about two months and was at all times supervised by the Director of the Museum, who continuously offered his suggestions and opinions so as to achieve a good final result.

So in this way the tile flooring was installed in its new enclave. Later the joinings and spaces were filled in and also the chipped edges of the tiles; likewise a plaster moulding was fitted around the flooring this was to delimit the space and cover up the difference in level between the surface of the wall and that of the tiles.

Conclusions.

This case could be considered as a pioneer in the safeguarding and preservation of this type of ceramic floor in the Murcian Region. Even though the whole tiling has lost its original function and its original visual focus, at least it will stand as witness to an artistic expression from the past, especially after the recent demolition of the house from which it came. There is no doubt that it is thanks to this attitude that today we can enjoy one of the most beautiful exhibitions of Nineteenth Century Valencian tile flooring in the South East and for this reason, the initiative and basic idea of recovering such works should serve as a model for similar actions in the future.

Nevertheless, the great disadvantage that laying the flooring in an architectural frame on the wall of a building which could be conditioned against possible future deterioration is being questioned today. But it can be justified because it fulfilled the criteria of the time.

Nowadays if this type of intervention with tile work were to be carried out, it would undoubtedly be much more appropriate and recommendable to use other supporting backgrounds that would separate such tiling from the wall. Rigid suitable panels of different materials could be employed, according to the requirements, which would serve as supports and allow easy fixture at the same time, facilitating any possible transport or transfer so that the tiles would in no way be damaged. They could be held together and also fixed to the support with commonly used modern materials, which were less harmful to the tiles, and which would form a light, inert bed that afforded sufficient guarantees of stability and adhesion. The exact characteristics of the group would need to be borne in mind, as would each ceramic tile, taking into account its size, thickness, material composition, state of conservation, resistance, need for reinforcing and restoration etc. Similarly, in the case of large tilings, it would be convenient to separate them into smaller panels, for easier assembly, so that on relocating them, the composition could be more easily put together for an integral reading.

⁷ A sum of 13,800 pesetas was allocated for this fixing process in the Museum, according to the «General Estimate» of April 1967.



1. A general view of the ceramic flooring from the main room in the house, now installed on a side wall in the Museum of Archaeology of Murcia.



2. Detail of the God Apollo in the centre of the tiling.



3. Detail of one of the minor sides of the tiling depicting the Seasons with ornamental borders.



4. Detail of the allegory representing Spring in a corner of the tiling.