

Strand 5: Crafts in the Origins of Design

British Art Nouveau Tiles as Household Identity Signifiers

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Introduction

There is a general view that the Art Nouveau style in Britain is not as prominent as in the rest of the European countries at the end of the nineteenth century. However, its growing popularity in Britain was certainly visible inside the home, particularly in the use of decorative ceramic tiles from that period, which clearly illustrate both the aesthetic and functional attraction of the tiles until now, due to the materials high durability under any climate or temperature. Therefore the tiles serve to indicate both the situation and circumstance of the time. Moreover the tiles were one of the most significant art forms in that period, due to the innovative techniques for industrial production developed in the 1840s. This development in Britain enabled tiles to be used for a far wider range of purposes. Their popularity continued well into the nineteenth century, resulting in an entire independent chapter on 'Victorian Tiles', within the history of tiles.

The rising popularity of tiles took place during a housing boom in Britain. The middle classes were buying or building their own houses, separating home from work. In the process, the identity of the home was defined and developed. The survey by the present writer shows that tiles were adopted in more varied way in dwelling houses, than any other type of buildings and the Art Nouveau tiles were used far more in a domestic context. This reflects the huge popularity of Art Nouveau at the time, additionally, it is true to say that there were strong connections between Art Nouveau and the sense and identity of the home. And it is this which allows us to discuss Art Nouveau in a domestic context through the usage and 'symbolic' function of the tiles.

This paper initially focuses on the development of the tile industry and the extensive use of the tiles in Victorian Britain. And, it specifically shows the unique use

of the tiles, in an area known locally as ‘Wally Closes’ in the West of Scotland. It then focuses on the use of Art Nouveau tiles and discuss the design values inherent in the process of forming the identity of the home.

1 The Victorian Tile Industry and the Use of Tiles in Dwelling Houses

The Gothic Revival in early nineteenth century Britain, with its return to medieval architecture and forms, led to a renewed interest in tile making. A leading architect of the period, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) sought to faithfully reproduce the old tiles for practical architectural detail. Nevertheless a great deal of experimentation was necessary as the art of making tiles in the medieval fashion had virtually died out in Britain with the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s. Pugin worked with Herbert Minton (1793-1858), son of the founder of the Minton firm, to recreate the style of medieval floors. After a great deal of trial and error, Minton succeeded in his endeavours. At first, tiles were made by hand in ‘plastic’ clay. Later, he adopted a method of dust pressing tiles from clay in a powdered state with the use of a screw press. It was highly successful, because the objects came out perfectly formed and needed only a short drying period. It was a far quicker method of producing tiles to meet the increasing demand for the new tiles. Through various stages, from around 1840 onwards, the new tiles began to be accepted in the Victorian society.

Further impetus to the production of decorative tiles was imparted by the glaze experiments again conducted by the Minton firm. That is called ‘Majolica Glaze’. It was inspired by tin-glazed earthenware in Italy and Spain, known as ‘Maiolica’ (The name is derived from a term employed in Italy for the lustre ware of Valencia which was sent there via the island of Maiolica). But Minton’s ‘Majolica’ is a totally different type of earthenware using coloured lead glazes, which enrich the surface colour with a shiny texture.

Through these stages of development and the increasing number of manufacturers, tile making was growing into one of the most successful industries. This coupled with the publishing of beautifully illustrated tile catalogues showed the almost infinite variety of pattern design from Gothic, Classic and Rococo to Art Nouveau.

Through this increased productivity, tiles began to be used extensively, both in highly prestigious public buildings to private dwellings. Coincidentally the rising popularity of tiles took place during a housing boom in Britain. The tiles were adopted as a household decoration, particularly in the homes of the upwardly mobile, newly affluent middle classes. They were as yet though, unlikely to be found in the aristocratic or working class houses. And in the middle class houses, a design survey by the present writer finds that the high percent of the tile patterns actually used is the Art Nouveau style, even though a wide range of other designs were available at that time.

In the following section, the use of the tiles in a domestic context will be surveyed, focusing specicaly on one examples of tiled decoration in a specific area as a case study.

2 ‘Wally Close’ and the Tenements

As a distinctive feature of tile usage in a domestic context, ‘Wally Closes’ will be analysed in this section. In the West of Scotland ‘Wally Closes’ are common in urban areas such as Glasgow, Greenock, and Paisley, and are conspicuous by their use of tiles. ‘Wally Close’ is a local nickname given to the common entrance passage of tenements which have been decorated with wall tiles. The tenement is the traditional form of urban housing in Scotland¹. The solid, dignified stone frontages are typical features of the buildings. In the common entrance passages of tenements, the lower part of the walls would have been painted. But, in the 1890s, when the major tenement schemes developed, the painted wall of middle-class tenements were replaced by tiled dados, tiled walls began to appear in the common passage, creating the so-called ‘Wally Closes’ (fig.1). ‘Wally’ is a colloquial Scottish word which means china or similar materials, as in ‘wally teeth’ (false teeth) and ‘wally dog’ (seated spaniel figures, usually made as facing pairs). ‘Wally’ was rarely applied to high quality crockery or whole dishes, so the word ‘wally’ describes ceramics or similar objects which are not of

¹ Frank Worsdall, *The Glasgow Tenement : A Way of Life*, Glasgow, Richard Drew Publishing, p.107-124.

high quality but are familiar to local people. The 'wally closes' have major significance not only in the use of tiles but also in connection with the local community.

The original motive in adopting the new tiles for the walls in the closes can be thought of principally in three ways. Firstly, vast quantities of tiles for various purposes had been produced and the subsequent cheapening of products enabled tiles to be used extensively. Secondly, their use could arise from the nature of the Scottish climate and the style of tenements which did not have a main door. The street entrance was traditionally open, so that it sometimes became a shelter from a sudden shower or a place for children to play, but the driving rain and frost led to the decay of the entrance walls. The durability of tiles protected walls against perishing from dampness, and they were more easily cleaned than painted surfaces, therefore advantageous in heavy industrial cities like Glasgow. Thirdly, tiles had an effective decorative aspect for the closes. In addition to the drabness and monotony of the exterior of the tenements, the closes were quite dark and light was obtained from either skylights or staircase windows during day time. In these circumstances, it was desirable that the general tone of colour and decoration should be both bright and cheerful. Tiles were chosen to make the tenements more attractive. Eventually it became one of the most appealing factors in the advertisements for the better class tenements. Based on this background, the idea of using tiles for the closes began to be largely accepted. And the term 'wally close' was adopted by the local community as a generic term to describe closes that had tiled walls.

The basic style of the tiled wall in the close was about 150cm-160cm in height; from the floor level up to a height of about 120cm, it consisted of plain square tiles (152mm square) or rectangle tiles (75mm×152mm); above this, plain patterned tiles were positioned to make the dado band; moldings were then laid on the top. The tiling generally extended from the entrance to the first floor, but in the high quality tenements, it continued up to the top floor. Sometimes a band of stenciling was added to the plaster above the tiles. Based on this style, variations can be seen (fig.2).

Most of the tiles were decorated with embossed patterns which were molded in relief on the surface of the tiles. Once a pattern had been molded on to a die-cast, an infinite number of tiles could be produced cheaply using the dust press method of

production. Without exception, tiles were decorated in coloured glazes which were most effective when applied to these embossed tiles; the glaze would form a 'pool' in the lower areas, appearing darker than the adjacent raised areas.

The second most common type of tile decoration was tube-lining or its cheaper substitute, relief-pressing. The raised line of the former had been 'piped' on like cake icing on an unfired body. After the first firing, coloured glazes were subsequently applied and served to further outline the design, they were then fired again. Tube line could be applied to a biscuit tile, and it could also be applied to an unfired tile with the coloured glazes added at the same time. These decorative processes were all done by hand. It was a time-consuming job. The tube-lining tiles were relatively expensive. In order to make them available to the popular market, the relief-pressing technique was adapted to machine production simply by making a metal die from which tiles could be pressed in imitation of the real thing. Although it markedly increased availability and produced perfect and accurate lines, it was not possible to create the unique effect of the various thickness of lines found on hand made tube lined-tiles.

Besides these decorative tiled walls, the closes had various interior fittings such as heavily carved balustrades or cast iron balusters, doors and windows with stained glass panels, and encaustic tile or tessellated floors.

It is worth studying the 'wally closes' from a social point of view, because living in a 'wally close' at one time brought with it a certain social status in Glasgow. Tenements were originally regarded as working-class residences but with the great growth of the city westwards and southwards, it gradually became accepted that middle-class people could own a flat in a tenement without any social stigma. However, a class distinction remained. Glaswegians could tell the difference between the tenements for the middle-class and the working-class by asking if the close was tiled; if so, it was middle-class, for working-class closes had only painted plaster. The accent you spoke with, the school you attended and the clubs you joined marked social standing. In Glasgow and surrounding towns, living up a 'wally close' was an unspoken statement and a symbol of prestige. These various aspects of wally closes show the quality of the tenements from an architectural point of view, and the subtleties of class distinction

from a social perspective. In the next section, an area will be focused on for a detailed survey of wally closes, in considering Art Nouveau style and the identity of the home

3 Case Study – The Hyndland Area

Hyndland is situated in the ‘West End’ of Glasgow. The West End was a middle-class residential area which had been developed along the western extension of the city on the north side of the river Clyde. In the Hyndland area, the railway system was already established, so it provided convenient travel for those who lived in the outer suburbs and worked in the city centre. In this area, a tenement scheme was developed between 1898 and 1910. This was also the period when decorative ceramic tiles were at the peak of fashion as mentioned before, so that various ‘wally closes’ can be seen in the middle-class residential areas. For this case study, 161 closes in the Hyndland area were surveyed.

According to the survey, eighty-nine percent of the closes have tiled walls and eleven present are of the paneled dado type. The extent of tiling is mostly up to the first floor, and about thirty percent had tiled walls which continued up to the top floor. Although all the tenements in this area may be regarded as ‘high-quality’, the extent of tiling suggests some social distinction within the buildings. Focusing on some tenements which had the tiling up to the top floor, various relations were examined - for instance, concerning the date of construction, builders, architects and locations. The first three points have no bearing on the extent of tiling, however, as far as the location is concerned, a certain relationship can be seen.

The tenements which have the tiling up to the top floor are located either in the most convenient area close to the main streets, or the geographically central area having a good view of the Bowling Green and gardens. In these tenements, not only the extent of the tiling is the longest, but also the individual tiles are of considerably better quality. Some were done by hand-made tube-lining. Furthermore, the layout of the flats also reflects socioeconomic status – Drawing-Room, Dining Room, Parlour, Bathroom, two or three Bed Rooms, Kitchen with Scullery and Servant’s Room.

This relationship between the extent of tiling and the location will be clearer if compared with some other tenements in this area which have the tiled wall only on the ground floor. These tenements are located along or close to the railway lines where noise and air pollution would be much greater at that time. In these tenements, the tile's colour range was limited and the layout of the flat was smaller – Parlour, one Bedroom and Kitchen with Bed. They were built to a high standard but in a cheaper way compared with the former examples.

Generally speaking, each row of tenements had four or five closes and the most expensive flats had their own 'main door' entrance onto the street. The closes are decorated with the some tiles and the same extent of tiling. However, sometimes one of the closes in the same tenement block would have a distinctly different type of tiles and a broader extent of tiling. They are usually at the end of the building, giving a wider view from the windows. This is because the builder intended these properties to have a particular 'class distinction'. In fact, the layout of these flats have either more or larger rooms than the others in the same tenement block, according to the survey of plans of these tenements². And in Wally Closes of those type of tenements, Art Nouveau style are distinctively used.

Surveying the pattern design of tiles, Art Nouveau style accounts for more than eighty percent of all the patterns in the wally closes. The rest of the design are Gothic and naturalistic plant design. The chronological tendency will also be clear seeing the dates of the execution of the tenements, which developed in a different period between 1898 and 1910.

Art Nouveau motifs started to appear on tiles from about 1897, and enjoyed their greatest period of popularity just after the turn of the century. In this area, distinctive motifs started to appear after 1902. Sources for the design came from nature and the undulating forms, notably the whiplash curve of tendrils or plant stems are characteristic of the style. But the tiles in this area did not show these typical Art Nouveau style but rather naturalistic Art Nouveau style close to reality. More abstract design of the style

² Plans of Tenements in the Hyndland area kept in Strathclyde Regional Archives in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

can be seen in around 1905 up to 1910 including the design echoed with the Glasgow Style (fig.3) led by the local designers like Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928).

In parallel with the inflow of Art Nouveau motifs, the most ornate close styles can be seen (fig.4). The decorative tiled panels were laid in the centre which was usually bordered with plain tiles. Eleven or twelve different types of tiles were used (but more commonly six or seven). Furthermore the height of the tiled wall marked the highest point for the decoration. It is also noticeable that the range of colouring increased, using brighter coloured glazes (skyblue, orange, yellow and pink in addition to the previous colouring).

The survey above indicates that the majority of tiles in this residential area show the influence of the Art Nouveau Style. The greatest variety of pattern and panel design in the Art Nouveau style can be seen in around 1902. Moreover in the wally closes of the special tenements – the ‘higher class’ of tenement, located in better surroundings, with tiling up to the top floor – the Art Nouveau style is a distinctive feature. In other words, Art Nouveau tiles are used to highlight the specific usage and status of the tenements. Therefore, the Art Nouveau style is used in a symbolic way, and overall the style signifies the area as a residential one.

Conclusion / Art Nouveau Tiles as a signifier of household identity.

Apart from the case of Wally Closes, the survey in other residential areas in England and Wales finds a very similar tendency. The pattern design is predominantly the Art Nouveau style and are distinctively used for the wall decoration in and around the entrance of the houses, such as the porch, entrance hall, and the entrance corridors in a similar way to the Wally Closes. They are clearly visible from the street and are also a part of the facing of the house frontage. The use of tiles in dwelling houses was in fact highly recommended at that time. As the following piece from contemporary literature clearly indicates;

Glazed brick and tiles are capable of endless variations and durability beyond any other materials in our humid air³.

³ H.R.Hawies, *Art of Decoration*, 1881. P.405

And in another piece;

The various tones of colouring [...] and its strongly glazed surface, render it not only an artistic but a cleaner material for all such purposes⁴.

In addition to the practical point of view expressed above, another contemporary book mentions the decorative effects of tiles.

The money spent on a piece of *bric-à-brac* or an ordinary water colour painting, if judiciously laid out, would provide for the decoration, in good glazed terracotta or tile-work, of the entrance door of a house; and, with skeletons of London street houses might be vivified and brought into, at least, some semblance of pleasant life and colour⁵.

After the Industrial Revolution, the more productive work was transferred to factories, offices and shops, and the house became a refuge, a place apart from commercial life with different morals, rules and guidelines to protect the soul from the rigors of the workplace. In this context, not only ideological but also visual, physical and other ‘symbolic’ social/cultural identity signals were required in the home. The polychromey of tiles enriched and enhanced the colour of houses, where previously only grey monotonous rows of buildings had stood. Moreover the pattern designs tended to specify the function of building; Gothic and Classic styles for example, were used for public buildings. New social identities for home owners, required new visual identities for the home itself. Meanwhile tile culture had previously always been associated with mediavalism or the exotic in the British mind. The appearance of the new art form, Art Nouveau, which had no connection to the past traditions or exotic cultures, led tiles to be used purely as decorative materials to adorn the walls. Art Nouveau tiles then as a form of ‘ceramic signifier’ could answer the desires for a symbolic cultural identity required in the new residential area, for the new upwardly mobile middle classes. Equally, we can see that tile decoration created and evoked the sense of a homely atmosphere as below;

⁴ Robert W. Edis, *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*, London, C.Kegan Paul & Co., 1881, p.57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.58

A pretty tile [· · ·] would in my mind, do more keep men and women at home
and do more to keep family love⁶.

From these various aspects and perspectives, it is clear that the tiles, and particularly the
Art Nouveau style have played a significant role in establishing the symbolic identity of
the home of the time in Britain.

⁶ W.J. Loftie, *A Plea for Art in the House*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1876, p.96.