

From Seville to Southwark: maiolica tiles and tile pictures in sixteenth-century Europe

Summary of a lecture in memory of John Black delivered by Timothy Wilson in the Ashmolean Museum, 23 March 2019.

This lecture was in honour of the OCG's first President, John Black, eminent academic in environmental sciences and Principal of Bedford College, University of London, who died in 2018. In retirement he took an intensive interest in English tin-glazed pottery; his *British Tin-glazed Earthenware* was published by Shire in 2001. He was an active collector of delftware and learnt to be a skilful restorer. The greater part of his collection was auctioned at Jones and Jacob, Watlington 24 November 2018.



(1) Delftware plate, Delftfield, Glasgow c1760



(2) Delftware plate, Henry Delamain's factory Dublin, c1760

In 2009 Dr Black generously gave to the Ashmolean a plate made at Delftfield near Glasgow (1) and one from Henry Delamain's factory in Dublin (2), which are significant extensions to the previously rather limited geographical range of the Ashmolean's delftware collection.

He was particularly interested in ceramic

transitions, especially the arrival in England from the Low Countries of the tin-glaze technique from the 1560s onwards. Reflecting John's interests, this lecture focused on a ceramic art form which criss-crossed Renaissance Europe.

From the middle of the 15C, workshops across Italy — including Naples, Siena, Faenza, Pesaro and Venice — produced virtuoso tile pavements of brilliant imagination. In these pavements the tiles tend to be independent works which can be variously arranged — they do not combine to create a single pictorial composition.

In 1498, we have the first archival record of one of the three itinerant heroes of my story, the Italian Niculoso Francisco, not in Italy but in Triana, the potters' suburb of the great cosmopolitan port of Seville in Spain.

The earliest work signed by Niculoso is a tomb slab in the parish church of Triana, dated 1503 (3). This is the first dated example I know of a maiolica composition of multiple joining tiles. It was not an art form that had been developed in Italy; the only Italian multi-tile pictorial composition I can think of which might be earlier is a six-tile *Sorrows of the Virgin* with the arms of Piccolomini of Siena, formerly in Berlin; this was published with a suggested dating of c1460; but since it was destroyed in World War II, its dating and indeed its authenticity are unconfirmed.



(3) Maiolica tile tomb slab of Íñigo López in Santa Ana, Triana, signed NICULOSO FRANCISCO ITALIANO ME FECIT, dated 1503

I am uncertain how compositions like the tomb slab were made. It may be that sometimes a pounced cartoon was used, but it would seem possible also to do it by laying out once-fired tiles covered with glaze and for the painter to move over them on a wheeled trolley of some sort.

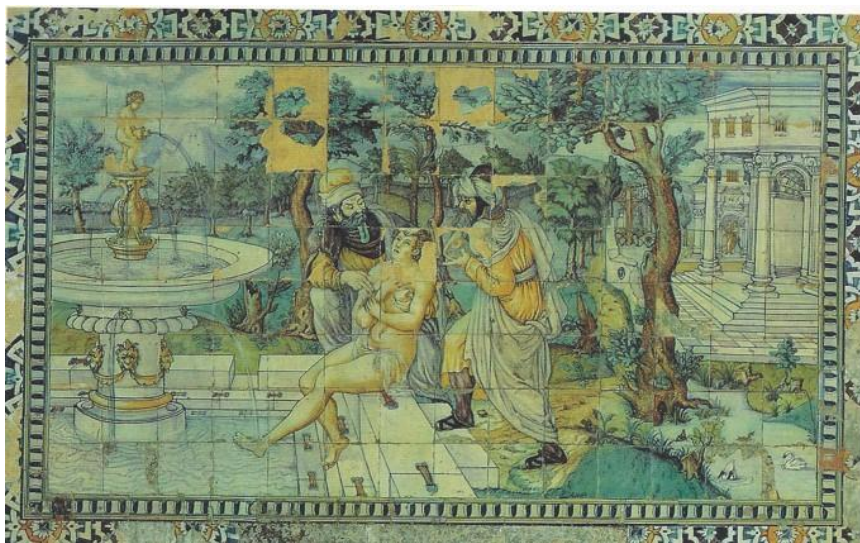


(4) *Visitation* altarpiece in the Alcázar, Seville, signed NICULOSO FRANCISCO ITALIANO ME FECIT and dated 1504

with the Medici ring and feathers device (5) was presented to the Ashmolean by Anthony Ray.

About 1523 a pavement of *arista* tiles, probably from Niculoso's workshop, was laid in the Poyntz chapel in the church of St John the Baptist in Bristol; Bristol, of course, had flourishing trade links with Seville.

Seville is not far from the border with Portugal and at least two commissions from Niculoso come from buildings in Portugal, including a panel at Évora. A tile picture industry developed in Portugal and became almost the Portuguese national art form, as those who have been to the splendid tile museum in



(6) *Susanna and Elders* from Quinta da Bacalhôa, Azeitão, Portugal, dated 1565

certainly Ligurian, are three large-scale soldiers, which come from a palace in Savona and were probably made there (8). Curiously all three have had the faces vandalized in a way reminiscent

Niculoso is documented in Triana from 1498 to 1526, but no archival record has been found of him in Italy. He is sometimes signs 'Pisano', 'of Pisa' and the affinities of his work with Siennese maiolica of about 1500 and with the work of the Della Robbia workshop in Florence suggest that he may indeed have been from Tuscany.

In the Chapel of the Kings in the Alcázar is a mighty *Visitation* altarpiece (4), doubtless a royal commission. Nothing like this had ever been done before and the sources are astonishingly eclectic. The orange-ground decoration is Italianate, echoing prints by artists like Nicoletto da Modena, and reminiscent of Siennese maiolica. But the Jesse and the prophets are northern-looking (Flemish or German), while the central scene has been convincingly compared with an illustration in a devotional book printed in Paris in 1494.

Niculoso's workshop also made tile pavements. Tiles moulded with designs in relief, known as *arista*, were made, for instance, for the chapel of Pope Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici) in Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome. A tile



(5) *Arista* tile from the Chapel of Leo X, Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome, c1514

Lisbon will know.

A delightful panel with *Susanna and the Elders* at Quinta da Bacalhôa could be an early example of the art by Portuguese makers (6).

The story now moves back to Italy, to Liguria, the region of north-west Italy that includes Genoa, Savona and the potters' town of Albisola, near Savona.

The *Madonna* (7) was perhaps made in Genoa and is dated 1529.

Less secure in date, but



(7) *Madonna and child* dated 1529. Museo di S Agostino, Genoa



(8) *Marcello*. Probably Savona, mid-16C. Palazzo Madama, Turin

of Protestant iconoclasm in northern Europe; it is not known when or why. The backgrounds are in patterns of Ligurian tiles, locally made but imitating Seville tiles.

Equally uncertain in date are a *Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint George and the dragon* (9), in the Genoese church of S Maria di Castello. Around these figure-scenes are tiles with designs that again echo originals from Seville.

Genoa and Seville were closely linked by trade. My hypothesis is that the technique of multi-tile panels was learnt by

Ligurian potters by imitation of the works of Niculoso, but I can provide no firm evidence for this.

The second wandering hero of my story is Gironimo Tomasi. Gironimo was a maiolica-painter from Urbino, whose work, Justin Raccanello and Camille Leprince have argued, can be detected in products of the Fontana workshop in Urbino. In 1575 he painted and signed in Urbino a large plate depicting the Villa d'Este; the plate was



(9) *Saint George and the dragon*. Church of S Maria di Castello, Genoa



(10) *The Adoration of the Shepherds* painted by Gironimo Tomasi, Albisola, 1576. Now in the church of Nostra Signora della Concordia, Albisola Marina

destroyed in

Berlin in World War II, but proves Gironimo was then still in Urbino. By the following year he had come to Savona or Albisola and that year painted a large *Adoration of the Shepherds* (10), following a painting by the local painter Antonio Semini.

The panel is signed as 'Made in Albisola by the hand of Agostino.... Gironimo of Urbino painted it'. The surname of Agostino, presumably the owner of the workshop where the panel was made, has been deliberately, for some unexplained reason, excised (11), leaving the possibility that the potter concerned was Agostino Salamone, Agostino Isola or (most likely) Agostino Conrado.



(11) Defaced signature on the lower right tile

By 1582, Gironimo had moved on to Lyons, another commercial city with a large Italian population. That year he painted a plate with *Aaron's rod*, now in the British Museum; it is initialled *GTVF* (*Gironimo Tomasi Urbinate fecit*), dated and marked as made in Lyons. This is the first marked piece of *istoriato*, one of incunabula of French *faïence*. Gironimo died, apparently in poverty, in Lyons in 1602, and it was

above all at Nevers that the tradition of maiolica in the Italian style developed in the 17C, principally in the hands of the Conrado family from Liguria, but tile pictures were never an important part of their business.



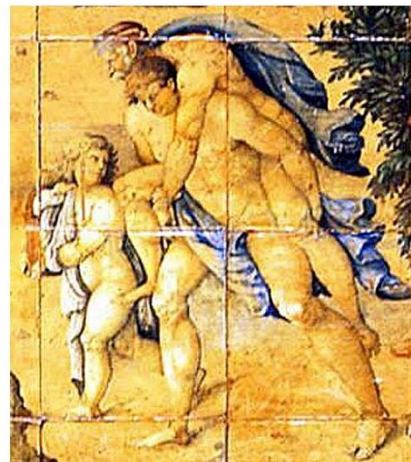
(12) *San Crescentino*. Palazzo Ducale, Urbino

Back in Gironimo's native Urbino, multi-tile pictures remained exceptional. This panel (12), which does not, as one might think, represent St George but St Crescentinus, a soldier-martyr who also killed a dragon, though in his case there was no princess to be rescued. He is the patron saint of Urbino. It seems to me possible, though far from certain, that this was painted, for a client or church in Urbino, by Gironimo, having learnt in Liguria the technique of multi-tile pictures. The iconographical similarity to the St George in Genoa (9) is striking, but may be coincidence.

The most substantial surviving tile pictures in the Urbino style are in Portugal, at Quinta das Torres, Azeitão. They depict two dramatic scenes from ancient history: *The suicide of Dido, with the construction of Carthage* (13) and *Aeneas and his family escaping from Troy* (14). How and when they got to this villa near Lisbon is unknown. They were published in 1946, but I have never found good colour images, and am unable to form a view as to whether these might also be by Gironimo. If they are, they may have been painted in Liguria for export to Portugal.



(13) *The Suicide of Dido*. Quinta das Torres, Azeitão, Portugal



(14) Detail of panel showing Aeneas and his family escaping from Troy

The third hero of my story, Guido di Savino, was from a potting family in Castel Durante, near Urbino. He is documented in Antwerp, the greatest commercial entrepôt of northern Europe, by 1508. He married a local woman and took the Flemish surname 'Andries'. There was no local tradition of maiolica tableware, so the workshop he set up made mainly pharmacy jars and tiles.

The pavement of which these tiles with the arms of Anne de Montmorency, Grand-Master of France, were made was for the chapel at Montmorency's chateau at Fère-en-Tardenois in northern France (15).

In England, we have the wonderful tiles at The Vyne in Hampshire, made by Guido's craftsmen for William Lord



(15) Part of a pavement with arms of Montmorency, Fère-en-Tardenois. Workshop of Guido Andries, Antwerp, before 1538

Sandys, a member of Henry VIII's inner circle. Guido himself was invited by Henry VIII to come and work for him, but this came to nothing.

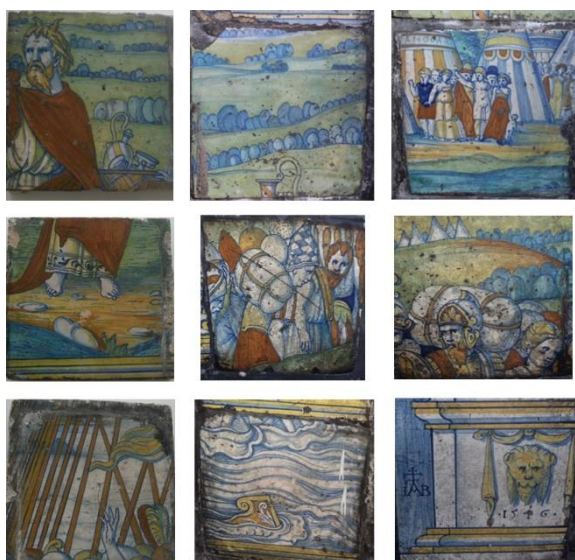
After Guido's death in 1541 his widow married another potter, Franchois Frans. It may have been he who introduced to Antwerp the making of composite tile pictures at their workshop at the sign of Den Salm (The Salmon).

This *Conversion of Saul* (16) is composed of tiles said to have been found near Den Salm; the sophisticated design has been attributed to an Antwerp artist in the circle of Peter Coecke van Aelst.

An elaborate tile mural with scenes from the Old Testament Book of Tobit made for the Dukes of Braganza in 1558 at Vila Viçosa, Portugal, is probably another work by the same team.



(16) *The Conversion of Saul*. Den Salm workshop, Antwerp, dated 1547, Vleeshuis, Antwerp



(17) Tiles from murals with Exodus scenes at Firle Place. Den Salm workshop, Antwerp, 1546

Earlier than either of these are some tiles (17) at Firle Place, Sussex, from a commission carried out in 1546 for Sir John Gage. The few tiles remaining include two non-joining ones apparently showing Moses, so there were probably two large panels, one showing *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea*, the other perhaps *The Gathering of Manna*.

These sadly few tiles are the remains of what must have been the most ambitious work of ceramic art yet seen in England.

Guido's sons were as enterprisingly mobile as their father had been. Frans Andries went to work in Seville and it has been suggested he may have made the *Susanna* panel (6).

Jasper Andries, having turned Protestant, left the hotbed of religious turmoil that Antwerp had become and was, together with a fellow Antwerp

potter, Jacob Jansen, in Norwich by 1567. I do not know any archeological evidence of their production in Norwich, but it is possible that the tiles commissioned about 1568 by Sir Nicholas Bacon for his house at Gorhambury, near Saint Albans, with his initials and crest (18), were made by Andries and Jansen.

The subsequent establishment by Jansen and other Flemings of workshops at Aldgate and later in Southwark is, as is well known, the beginnings of the English delftware tradition. Thanks to the bequest of Anthony Ray and to a website created by Dinah Reynolds, the Ashmolean is now one of the best resources for studying English delftware tiles.

I now return to France and Anne de Montmorency. In 1542 and 1549 he commissioned armorial tile pavements for his chateau at Écouen. These were made by the remarkable workshop in Rouen of Masséot Abaquesne.



(18) Tile with crest of Sir Nicholas Bacon. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Also dated 1542 and by Abaquesne's workshop, are two tile pictures (19), *Marcus Curtius* and an iconographically odd *Mucius Scaevola*, made for another of Montmorency's houses, Chantilly.



(19) *Marcus Curtius* and *Mucius Scaevola*. Workshop of Masséot Abaquesne, Rouen, 1542. Musée Condé, Chantilly

A triptych of scenes of the Flood is no less virtuoso, but undated (20).



(20) *Noah's Ark*. Workshop of Masséot Abaquesne, Rouen, mid-16C. Musée national de la renaissance, Écouen

There is no precedent in France for these tile pictures and Abaquesne was a trading entrepreneur rather than a trained potter. My guess is that he set up a pottery, recruiting workmen from Antwerp, where sophisticated tin-glaze had been made for decades. The Rouen enterprise and Den Salm are linked by the involvement of Montmorency, who perhaps encouraged Abaquesne. This hypothesis is corroborated by the similarities in the location markings on the backs of Antwerp and Rouen tiles, suggesting similar workshop practice (21).



(21) Backs of two Abaquesne tiles from Écouen (left and centre); and of one Den Salm tile from Firle Place (right)

However, the earliest Abaquesne tile pictures, of 1542, are earlier than the earliest known dated Antwerp ones, which are from 1546 and 1547, and no archival evidence for the presence of Flemish potters at Rouen has yet been found. The matter awaits further research.

This has been a story of to-and-fro connections from Italy to Seville and back, and from Italy to Antwerp, London, Rouen and across to Portugal. Skilled potters, seeking international markets, were mobile. They might be recruited by princes in a deliberate attempt to establish luxury industries; they might travel simply to exploit their skills to 'make their fortune'; often they were prompted to cross national borders by religious turmoil. It is a story of creative migration that transcends national schools and represents a veritable Single Market in artistic ceramics across 16C Europe.