

FINE ART OR Decorative Tile?

by Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF

The question of what to do with tiles arises from time to time. We walk on them, shower with them, and collect them. We use them as functional backsplashes (“Teapots,” Photo 1), as heat-resistant trivets (“Renaissance Herbs,” Photo 2), as accents for home decor (“Asian Seasons,” Photo 3), as collectible keepsakes from travels abroad (“Chinese Phoenix,” Photo 4), and as treasured antiques (“Boston Museum,” Photo 5). They are waterproof, heat-resistant, fade-resistant, tolerant of much abuse, and all around durable. They are, after all, ceramics that have been designed to be used and not just admired in a frame.

But what do we framers do with them? Glue them down or preservationally mount them? Glaze them or not? Keep them indoors or display them outdoors as well? Are they decorative or collectible? Following are some things to consider.

In the realm of interior design, decorative tiles are to countertops what border designs are to wallpaper. They are found as accent pieces to enhance a potentially plain counter or backsplash in both kitchens and bathrooms (see Photo 1). If designed for outdoor use, they are both functional and

decorative, like the numbers and/or letters that identify the homeowner’s surname or street address, and are tolerant to the elements.

Since tiles are durable it appears the design solution must accommodate the use and the protection of them. They may



Photo 1: Tiles are used as accents in bathrooms and splashguards in kitchens as seen in these 6"x6" standard-sized unframed kitchen tiles. (Produced from images of artwork published by Wild Apple Graphics of Chris A. Paschke.)



Photos 2 and 2a: These are a pair of 8"x8" brown, accented, ceramic tiles purchased 30 years ago at the annual Renaissance Faire in Novato, CA. They feature herbs from the Middle Ages and their healing powers. A street vendor sold them unframed as trivets. They were framed in this solid oak moulding from Victor Moulding.

tolerate heat and sunlight, but if the framing is to enhance and ensure their long-term protection, then additional care should be introduced.

I have stated before that even though an original watercolor will tolerate the heat of dry mounting, that does not mean it is the right method to use. The same rule applies here. A tile may tolerate silicone adhesive, the acids from wood, and direct sunlight, but we as framers must help to protect them from cracking, chipping, and damage from bad framing practices.

THE RENAISSANCE TRIVETS

Tiles that are kiln-fired are heat-tolerant ceramics and are often sold as trivets, as in the case of the Renaissance kitchen herbs pair (see Photos 2 and 2b). This pair of 8"x8" brown, accented, ceramic tiles was purchased 30 years ago at a Renaissance Faire in California.

A street vendor at the fair sold them unframed as trivets.

I decided against putting them to their originally intended use and framed them in an aged, barnwood style, solid oak moulding. The oak moulding is

reminiscent of the worn looking, half-timbered styling of houses during the Middle Ages and well suited the period of the tiles. They have hung in my dining room ever since.

Since wood mouldings will expand and contract with fluctuations in heat and humidity, I needed to leave the standard framing allowance so that the tiles would not break if the moulding shrunk. However, this allowance would also enable the tile to clink around in the frame, which might

on these tiles are actually meant to be displayed hung top to bottom (spring, summer, autumn, winter), rather than the way that they are seen here.

The moulding I selected is black with silver. Though it may appear a little bulky for these relatively small tiles, this selection actually accents and showcases them much more than any of the bamboo or Asian style mouldings I tested in the design process.

This is a rather deep moulding which projects the tiles about an

inch off of the wall, and enhances their clean, modern look. The contemporary nature of this moulding worked well with the patchwork mulberry paper strips in the background of the tiles, while the soft matte black finish accents and visually brings the eye into the Chinese characters. The soft silver bevel of the moulding works as a liner to both separate and showcase the inner tiles. As with the Renaissance tiles, the inner rabbets of these frames have also been lined with felt.

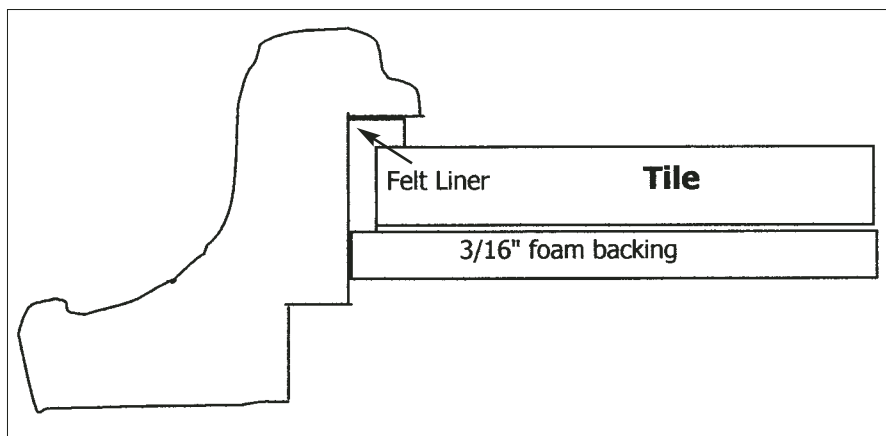


Diagram 1: The inside of the moulding rabbet was lined with felt to protect the tile edges.

contribute to possible chipping. Because the tiles are ceramic, I elected to line the inside rabbet of the moulding with a felt strip to act as a cushion between the tiles and the hardwood oak moulding during fitting (see Diagram 1). The felt liner helps to support the tile without the possibility of damage.

DECORATIVE ASIAN TILES

The set of 6"x6" Asian tiles (see photos 3 and 3a) were designed for use as accent in a backsplash, or bathroom's grouted tile installation. As illustrated here, they can also be framed as home decor. The four seasons represented by the symbols



Photos 3 and 3a: This set of 6"x6" decorative Asian tiles were framed with Larson-Juhl Soho moulding #345084 for home decor. They are correctly displayed hung top to bottom as spring, summer, autumn, and winter, rather than the way they are photographed here. (Courtesy of Wild Apple Licensing and Chris A. Paschke.)

PHOENIX COLLECTIBLE

What I love most about framing tiles is how unpredictable the moulding selections have turned out to be. Both with the above Asian tiles and with this Chinese Phoenix I anticipated that the moulding best suited to the design would have an Asian flavor to it. Yet the tiles, although Asian in subject matter, are extremely contemporary.

I thought I would frame the Phoenix with one of the marvelous bamboo or Asian influenced mouldings out there, but they did not very much for the tile. The bright colors of the Phoenix really called out for a moulding that could stand up to it, and the softer bamboos I tried were both too narrow and the colors were too subdued.

I ended up selecting a wide moulding with a European look and beautiful rust colored inner wood strip (see Photo 4). Not only does the rust strip match the color of the head feathers of the Phoenix, but the

carving of the moulding seemed to reflect that of the feathers of the bird. Even the antiqued gold of the carved moulding seemed to emulate the linear pattern of the feathers in the wings and tail.



Photo 4: This tile was designed by Chinese artisans and brought back as a travel collectible from mainland China. It is framed for the wall with Larson-Juhl 635 AB moulding that best accented its colors and visual lines. (Image courtesy of Thaeer A. P. Irvin.)

DESIGN PERIOD AND STYLE

I have discovered that when an image is painted, cast, or created in our contemporary time with our contemporary techniques it often has a contemporary flavor. Yes, the Asian tiles are Chinese characters, but they have been painted very stylized using abstracted paper backgrounds. The traditional bamboo look fought with them while the contemporary moulding worked better.

The Phoenix was produced using traditional firing and painting techniques from the Tang Dynasty; the image is very contemporary, and bamboo mouldings were too drab for it. Perhaps this can be explained as a contemporary rebirth of the Chinoiserie (pronounced *sheen woz' uh ree'*) styling of 18th century Europe. That is when popular Asian designs

of Japanese and Indonesian origin were mixed with other highly ornamented popular decorating style trends of the time, including Gothic, Neoclassic, and Rococo. The phoenix tile seems to support the look of Chinoiserie, a tile with basic Asian flair that rests well in a highly decorated almost Rococo moulding.

As a frame designer and PPEA accredited judge, I lecture that the period and style of the framing should fit the image. By that, I mean an early American image should be framed in an early American moulding style. A Renaissance or Baroque painting belongs in a moulding emulating that time period. Maybe that is



Photo 5: An antique tile of the original Museum of Fine Arts Boston building. (Shown courtesy of Gift Planning Solutions, Copperopolis, California.)

most true when dealing with traditional paintings and artwork created in the traditional style using traditional techniques.

However, I am beginning to see more often that periods and styles can overlap and, at times, be interchangeable. The hard-edged solid rules of design are softening. Maybe it's due to the current eclectic nature of home interior design trends today. Or that these

Asian tiles are simply a perfect example of 21st century Chinoiserie.

ANTIQUE COLLECTIBLE TILE

This tile seen in Photo 5 is an antique image of the original Museum of Fine Arts Boston founded in 1870, which moved to Copley Square in 1876, then doubled in size in 1890. It finally relocated to the current Huntington Avenue location in 1909. My client has emotional attachment to this tile, having worked with the museum in a consulting capacity nearly 20 years ago. Originally framed in 1996, it currently hangs in the corporate California offices of Gift Planning Solutions.

This antique black and white ceramic tile is $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick, measures $5\frac{1}{16}$ " square, and shows the original Museum of Fine Arts Boston building from 1876. The tile has naturally aged to an off white color, and has slight fissures and chips around the edges as well as tiny hairline fractures beginning to run across it.

Though still in one piece, it has an antique delicacy that needs to be protected from further edge



Photo 6: Reverse bevel cut $\frac{1}{2}$ " strips of 8-ply board were measured, mitered, and glued to the bottom support and flush against the tile as additional support.

damage (see Photo 6). The tactile, smooth texture of the architectural ceramic image and coolness of the tile when touched enhanced its overall beauty as an antique collectible. They wished the tile be protected in a frame, but did not want it to be glazed.

Matching the natural aging of the whites and respecting the ash grey appearance of the black glazes was very important for color unity. The visual texture of the surrounding mats, fillets, and liners needed to reflect the same texture from within the tile. Overall frame dimensions calculated $10\frac{1}{4}'' \times 10\frac{1}{2}''$ using a black moulding, $1\frac{3}{8}''$ wide with $1\frac{3}{4}''$ rabbet depth. The moulding was chosen for its vertical linear lines, washed dusty black color, and depth. A narrow, antiqued gold fillet was selected to match the frame for the inner liner (see Diagram 2).

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Bleached Mexican bark paper was chosen for its marvelous mottled and marbled appearance and was wrapped around two 4-ply black museum boards dry mounted together for the top mat and fillet accent (see Photo 7). A $\frac{3}{16}''$ black foam board was used for the bottom window opening mat, straight cut just large enough to snugly fit and hold the tile in place. The bark paper was mounted to the face of the 8-ply blunt cut window opening with pure film adhesive in a mechanical press at 190°F for two minutes and cooled under a weight.

The mounted paper mat was then cut to expose the open window leaving a 1" trim with mitered 45° corners. The bevel was

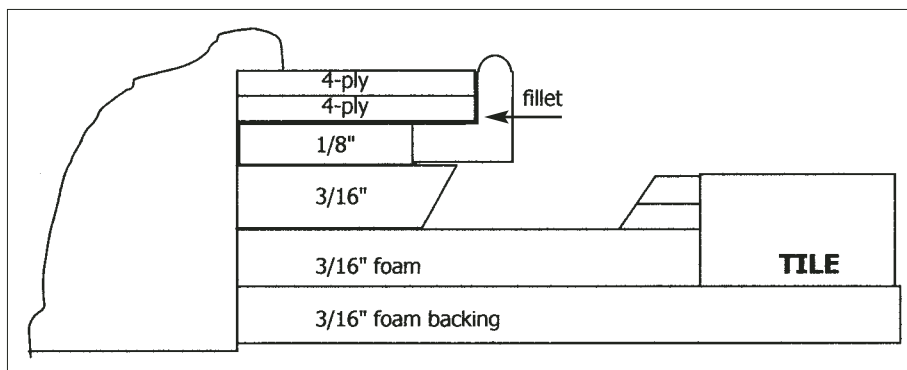


Diagram 2: This is a cross-sectional view of the frame package for the tile seen in Photo 5.

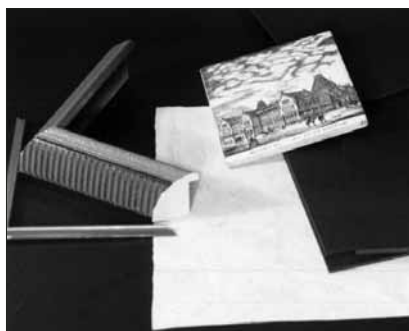


Photo 7: A Victor Moulding fillet 11064, Larson-Juhl 404N moulding, bleached Mexican bark paper, $\frac{3}{16}''$ acid-free foam board, and 4-ply black Strathmore museum boards were used in the project.



Photo 8: Mount the bark paper to the face of the created 8-ply blunt cut window opening, remove center, miter corners, and wrap to the back of the opening with a tacking iron.

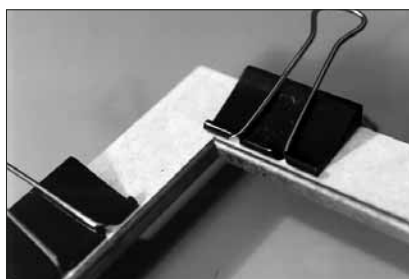


Photo 9: The fillet was chopped and fitted, glued, and held to dry with bulldog clips for the top mat accent.

ironed to bond the paper/adhesive to the square edged board and the resulting tabs were turned to the back and pressed with a heated tacking iron (see Photo 8). The top mat was wrapped in the same way. Next, the fillet was chopped, glued, and fitted into the window. bulldog clips were used to hold the fillet tight against the mat while it dried (see Photo 9).

The tile is fitted into the modified sink mat unit. Strips of scrap 8-ply boards about $\frac{1}{2}''$ wide were measured, mitered, and glued to the bottom mat after the tile was inserted. These were placed flush against the upper edge of the tile for support and color accent. An $\frac{1}{8}''$ black spacer was reverse bevel cut and positioned under the top filleted, window accent mat and the project was ready for the final addition of the top wrapped mat/fillet window piece for completion (see Photo 10). The completed raised top mat is shown in the final detail shot of the corner of the framed tile (see Photo 11).

CONSERVATION FRAMED?

Most materials selected for this project were acid-free or inert. The Mexican bark paper is wood-based and is in direct contact with the

tile edges. The tile itself had been held in storage for nearly 80 years in non-conservation tissue paper and an acidic cardboard gift box. Tiles appear to be somewhat tolerant of acids since they originate from natural materials and elements from the earth. Perhaps it is their ceramic nature and the fact they have fired glazes that protect and waterproof them.

This antique tile has been adequately preserved as a touchable antique as the client requested, but is the customer always right? As framing professionals we know the value of teaching conservation framing. There are items we frame that will remain somewhat chemically inert. In many cases, tiles need to be protected more from chipping, cracking, and damage from mishandling more so than from acids and outgassing.

In this case, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts remains the focal point of the frame design, has been protected from further damage by protecting its edges and relieving any stresses, and is still



Photo 10: The tile has been fitted into the modified sink mat unit, the spacer has been cut and positioned, and the project is ready for the final addition of the top wrapped mat/fillet window piece.

able to be visually enjoyed. It remains, however, continually exposed to light, humidity, and everyday pollutants without special precautions to protect it. I recently saw this piece, and it looks as fantastic and well preserved as it did when my client first picked it up in 1996.

If tiles are designed to be grouted into shower walls or washed daily as a backsplash in a kitchen exposed to grease and detergents, surely they can tolerate the riggers of fine picture framing practices. Yet perhaps we should always consider the nature of the



Photo 11: A 3/8" foam spacer added depth, dimension, and visual interest to the design.

beast. Tiles of numbers for the front porch might be siliconed into place, but an antique tile at least deserves the framing dignity of any 100-year-old piece of fine art, and we must always design for the art. There will forever be a difference between decorative art and fine art, whether it be an open edition reproduction, a limited edition, or a tile. ■



Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF, owns Designs Ink, featuring commercial custom framing, fine art/graphic design, and industry consulting. Specializing in mounting, matting, design creativity, and fine art, she works with many industry leaders.