

Peranakan Tiles: The Japanese Connection

By Anne Pinto Rodrigues

The vibrant glazed tiles adorning the shophouse exteriors in Joo Chiat, Katong and Emerald Hill drew me to the fascinating world of the Peranakan tile. In the late 1900s and the early part of the 20th century, affluent Peranakans embellished the façades of their houses, courtyards and walkways with decorative tiles, in place of traditional carvings or sculptures. Internationally, these tiles were known as majolica tiles, but in Singapore and Malaya they came to be referred to as Peranakan tiles – a nod to the community that could afford to buy them and thus popularised them. The word Peranakan means ‘locally born’ in Malay. A majority of the Peranakans are descendants of marriages between Chinese traders who migrated to the British-controlled Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca) and local Malay women.

Prior to World War I, these ornamental tiles came to Singapore mostly from Britain and a few from other European countries like Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. So where is the Japanese connection, you may ask. Interestingly, most of the Peranakan tiles we see in Singapore today were made in Japan. Tiles salvaged from many of the demolition sites clearly display the words ‘MADE IN JAPAN’ at the back, along with the manufacturer’s name and/or trademark, making it easy to trace their history.



The back of a tile made by Fujimiyaki Tile Works, Japan

In the 1920s, Japanese tile manufacturers began producing imitations of British Victorian designs. Since the Japanese themselves lived in wooden houses, they had very limited use for the tiles. So the Japanese tile makers exported them, especially to places with a sizeable Chinese population like Singapore and Malaya, where an established demand for these tiles already existed.

Tiles with auspicious designs like fruits (pomegranates, pineapples, grapes and peaches), flowers (peonies, plum blossoms and lotus), birds (magpies, peacocks and the phoenix) and animals (dragons and *quilin*) became very popular with Peranakan customers. The 6” x 6” square tile



Japanese tiles with a peacock motif as seen at Everton Road near Tanjong Pagar

was the preferred size with the 6” x 3” half size used for borders and the 3” x 3” quarter size used as corner tiles. In addition to decorating the exteriors of houses, these ornate tiles were also used in Peranakan homes to beautify wooden/bamboo furniture such as altar tables, chairs, tea tables, foot-rests and dressing tables.

Victor Lim is Singapore’s leading tile collector. A Peranakan himself, Victor has been collecting tiles since he was a teenager. The most valuable pieces in his collection sit in a display cabinet under lock and key. What started out as a hobby is today his passion as well as a source of livelihood.

Victor elaborates on the Japanese connection. “With the onset of World War II, many Japanese tile manufacturing facilities were reassigned to produce weaponry. This disruption in trade led to the eventual decline of the Japanese tile industry. Of the 43 tile makers in Japan prior to World War II, only two to three have survived. The two largest manufacturers from those days, Danto Kaisha and Fujimiyaki Tile Works, are still in operation today.”



High-end, Japanese moulded tiles in Victor Lim’s collection

While Victor continues his one-man mission of educating people about the precious Peranakan tile, Singapore is now left with a very fragile legacy that needs to be conserved for the generations to come.



Victor Lim, tile collector and aficionado in his gallery

Anne Pinto Rodrigues has lived in Singapore for the past three years and enjoys exploring the city’s hidden corners. An avid traveller, she blogs at www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com about her travel experiences.

All photos by the author