

# TILE TALK

By Verne Maree



Wandering around ethnic neighbourhoods such as Little India, Chinatown and Katong, many of us admire the ubiquitous Peranakan tiles – those colourfully decorative adornments on shophouse façades, floors and five-foot ways. But Indian expat ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES's attraction to tiles goes deeper. In collaboration with leading Singaporean tile-collector Victor Lim, she has just published a coffee-table book titled *Peranakan Tiles Singapore* – the first-ever book on this subject.



## Where are you from, and what called you to Singapore?

Though born in India, I got my MBA at the University of Maryland and worked in Philadelphia for a couple of years before returning to India to get married. My husband's job brought us here from Mumbai in 2011.

## What's your writing background?

After working for years in the corporate sector – branding, communications and so on – and wanting to explore other aspects of my personality, I started a travel blog (noroadbarred.wordpress.com) about a year ago. I was also writing for Friends of the Museums' *Passage* magazine, and the editor, Andra Leo, asked me to interview tile collector Victor Lim in October 2014.

From that meeting, I wrote an article titled "Peranakan Tiles: The Japanese Connection". Victor already had the idea of self-publishing a book on Peranakan tiles; he was looking for a writer to work with him on it, and that's how it all started.

## I'm burning to know: what was the Japanese connection?

When Britain's tile industry declined in the wake of World War I, surplus manufacturing machinery was sold off to Japanese tile-makers. They began to produce imitations of Victorian tiles and exported them to places like Singapore where an established demand already existed. But to find out more, you'll have to read the book!

## Why did this project appeal to you?

I've always had a passion for tiles. Part of my family came from Goa, a former Portuguese colony famous for its beautiful *azulejos* – large compositions of tiles that paint a picture or tell a story. Mumbai (previously Bombay) has many British colonial buildings adorned with Victorian tiles. I've also picked up tiles during my travels to Europe, including Amsterdam.

**“In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.”**

– Baba Dioum

## Tell us about the book.

It traces the history of tiles over 6,000 years; but it's a coffee table book, not meant to be a history book. Most importantly, it showcases the tiles that you can see here in situ in Singapore – roughly a third are British tiles, another third are Belgian and the rest are Japanese.

For well over 30 years, Victor has been rescuing and collecting tiles, mainly from shophouses that have been demolished. Most of his collection was salvaged in the late 70s and early 80s, when a lot of Singapore's architectural heritage was lost to "progress". Apart from collecting, Victor is also well known for giving talks on Peranakan tiles and leading guided tours in Bukit Brown Cemetery, in addition to the restoration of tile-work in old Chinese temples. Interestingly, Little India presently has the largest number of tiles in Singapore.

## Why do we need this book?

It's a humble attempt to create awareness about these exquisite tiles, which are part of Singapore's fragile heritage of Singapore. I can't express it better than Baba Dioum, a highly respected environmentalist from Senegal in West Africa. He once said, "In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught."

## What goes into publishing a work like this?

At the start, I had no idea what the book would entail. It has been a lot of work: I've devoted most of this year to it. Victor and I agreed on the framework, the chapter flow and so on, and I did the writing. He already had a lot of photographs of tiles, including some fairly old ones, contributed by his friends, that hadn't been published anywhere before. He also hired a photographer – it's full of pictures!

## What exactly are Peranakan tiles?

The term broadly refers to decorative tiles known as "maiolica" or "majolica" tiles from various parts of the world that found favour with the relatively affluent Peranakans, or Straits-born Chinese, in



## Tiles – a potted history

- Nearly 6,000 years ago, the Ancient Egyptians used blue-glazed bricks to beautify their homes.
- From the 11th century, Spanish tin-glazed pottery was shipped to Italy via the island of Majorca – and the term "majolica tiles" stuck.
- After the Moors were driven out of the Iberian peninsula (late 15th, early 16th centuries), Italian majolica became much sought-after, and the craft spread throughout Europe.
- Flemish and Dutch craftsmen established a thriving delftware industry in England during the 17th and 18th centuries; in 1783, English potter Thomas Minton founded his famous ceramics company in Stoke-on-Trent.
- As the world's biggest tile-producer, Britain exported masses of them to its Asian colonies, including Singapore, Malaya, India and Burma.
- Art Nouveau was the last prominent trend in English tiles, flourishing in the Art Deco period of the 1920s and 1930s.

the late 1800s and early 1900s – not only in Singapore but also in Malaya, parts of Indonesia and elsewhere in the region; they decorate their walls and furniture with them.

## Tell us about your work as an FOM docent (museum guide), and more recently co-leader of its docent training programme.

In September 2014, I joined the FOM docent training programme (fom.sg) at the National Museum, and that's how I gained the understanding and appreciation of Singapore history that allowed me to contemplate writing a book of this nature. Joining the FOM has had such a positive impact on my life.

## Your message to our readers?

Joining the FOM is a great way for an expat woman new to Singapore to develop her interest in history and culture and build friendships with like-minded women. In any event, find something of your own to do. There are so many opportunities here. 📖

*Peranakan Tiles Singapore* is available at the Peranakan Museum (39 Armenian Street), at Chillax Market (Turf City), at Katong Antique House (208E East Coast Road), and Kim Choo (60 Joo Chiat Place). It's priced around \$60.

