

Transaction and Translation of Modernity: Japanese Majolica Tiles in Colonial India

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This paper aims at understanding the history of consumption of Japanese decorative tiles (commonly known as majolica tiles) in early twentieth-century India. Tiles formed a part of various miscellaneous goods that were thrivingly exported from Japan to India during the inter-war period. Since tiles are often preserved in their original condition as long as buildings remain, they may give us a more substantial idea than other commodities as to how and why Japanese goods were actively consumed by Indian people in the last decades of the British rule.

Tiles were generally introduced to India under the colonial administration in the nineteenth century as a result of the development of the British tile industry although some of the Muslim-dominant regions had a long tradition of tile architecture. Indian local elites initially accepted Victorian tiles as a status symbol, however, a series of epidemics in the late nineteenth century encouraged the middle classes to use tiles to improve public health condition. In spite of an increasing demand for tiles in the Indian market, the British industry could not meet it because of the post-World War I depression. Grasping this opportunity, the Japanese tile industry manufactured cheaper copies of British tiles, named 'majolica' after the Renaissance polychrome pottery, and successfully entered the Indian market. Slightly after this entry, Japanese majolica tiles adopted Hindu iconography for further popularisation of Japanese products in the Indian market. From an Indian perspective, consumption of Japanese tiles strongly reflected the boycott of British goods in the rise of nationalism. Also, Hindu images represented in Japanese majolica tiles were closely connected to nationalist propaganda.

To sum up, tile consumption in 1920s-30s India was a social, economic, and political matter among British authority, Japan's imperial ambition, and Indian nationalism. This paper thus demonstrates that the tile trade in colonial India - especially with Japan - shows us as to how Euro-centric social norms and cultural values in the form of mass-produced tiles were translated into modernity in an Indian context, and it consequently integrated consumers into a common aestheticism – the national landscape of independent India.