

To Brighten the Environment: Ceramic Tile Murals in Britain, 1950-70

by Lynn Pearson

Large-scale pictorial murals have long been a feature of European, particularly Portuguese, use of tiles, but these extravagant and colourful installations are a relative rarity in Britain; only during the 1950s and 1960s did the art of the ceramic mural really flourish in this country. This article looks at the background to their sudden popularity and considers the reasons for their gradual demise.

Ceramic murals produced by the major industrial tile manufacturers featured in our pubs, shops and hospitals from the late nineteenth century, but these were generally smaller-scale interior panels, as were the opus sectile works produced (mainly for churches) at the same time by Powell's of Whitefriars. Between the First and Second World Wars, although tile murals were still being made for the foreign market, particularly by Doulton's, their use at home had declined considerably in contrast with the continuing popularity of large-scale painted murals; the latter, however, were treated with some disdain by craftspeople and art historians.¹ During the late 1940s, as tile manufacturers struggled to recover from wartime constraints, much of their business was concerned with repairing war damage and the production of utilitarian plain tiles. The ceramics firms could seem rather old-fashioned, as an architect involved with the Hertfordshire postwar school construction programme recounted in Andrew Saint's *Towards a Social Architecture*:

'I had a firm to get in touch with in Ruabon, J. C. Edwards. The directors had never been to London before! We set up a meeting to discuss these tiles, and then somebody died at their end and they never came. It looked like never happening, so I went up to Ruabon.but there was no one man in the firm who could give me the answers. 'He knows all about prices, *he* knows about corrugation, *he* knows about thicknesses or colours'; you had to get three or four people in the firm together. They hadn't got a single catalogue which gave all the facts about the tiles.'²

The ceramics industry was also deeply suspicious of any foreign influences, the *Pottery Gazette* giving only two unenthusiastic sentences to the touring exhibition 'Picasso in Provence', which included several of the artist's ceramic works, when it arrived at Hanley Art Gallery in September 1950.³

Given this background, it seems almost incredible that by the mid-1950s the art of the large-scale ceramic mural was flourishing in Britain. One reason for this was that 'bringing art to the people' became an ideal of the postwar decade; mural painting was once again revived, with works being carried out in schools and public buildings throughout the country.⁴ However, the specific impetus behind the rise of the ceramic mural was provided by the 1951 Festival of Britain, and in particular the part played by Carter & Co of Poole. From mid-1949 fourteen leading British firms, including Carter's, worked together in what became known as the Festival Pattern Group (FPG) at the invitation of the

Council of Industrial Design. The Group, later expanded in number to twenty-eight, produced designs (many for textiles) based on crystal structure diagrams. One of Carter's contributions was a 3' by 2' wall tile panel created by their own designer Reginald Till and derived from the structure of zinc hydroxide; it was intended to be repeated over 'a very large plain wall area'.⁵ The panel, in red, yellow, pink and blue on black ground, was shown in the FPG display in the foyer of the Regatta Restaurant at the Festival. In addition, covering the outer south-east wall of the restaurant was a black and white ceramic mural, *The Waterfall*, an abstract spiral composition painted on tiles by the artist Victor Pasmore and made up by Carter's.⁶ Pasmore commented that 'the huge scale of the mural, together with its prominent position at the entrance to the Festival' gave him the scope to symbolise the postwar renewal of free expression.⁷

Following the removal of Board of Trade restrictions on the manufacture of decorative pottery in 1952, Carter's were poised to extend their mural design activities, which already encompassed the production of Peggy Angus's pattern-making tiles.⁸ Alfred Burgess Read (1898-1973) was appointed Head of the company's Design Unit in 1952, his principal role being to replace Reginald Till, who left the tile works in 1951. Until the mid-1950s, all Carter's mural design work was carried out by either Read or Angus.⁹ The first of the firm's post-Festival of Britain pictorial murals was installed in 1953 at Lewis's department store in Liverpool (Fig. 1).¹⁰ Some 65' long and 10' high, it was situated behind the servery counter of the cafeteria, and is still extant. This slip-outlined mural includes hand-printed and hand-painted tiles with strong, colourful imagery of outsize, stylised cooking utensils and items of food and drink. The designer was probably A. B. Read; it is not typical of Peggy Angus's style, and Read had designed tiles with kitchen imagery for Carter's as early as 1923.¹¹

After this dramatic, Festival of Britain-inspired piece, the demand for murals, especially in schools, continued to grow and in 1955 Ivor Kamlish (b1931) was appointed as assistant to A. B. Read, working solely at the tile works. Joseph Ledger (b1926) carried out several mural commissions for Carter's in the mid-1950s, including the faience panel *Europa and the Bull* (1953, for the firm's stand at the Building Trades Exhibition) and a large panel for the Poole Pottery itself showing pottery-making processes (1955, painted by Catherine Stern).¹² By the mid-fifties Pilkington's Tiles were also beginning to take an interest in mural work; the firm's house magazine *Hot Pot* remarked in spring 1955 on the number of special jobs recently carried out, including a large panel for Harlow New Town; this abstract, dark blue relief panel is still extant.¹³ Carter's, however, led the way in the late 1950s, with murals designed by invited artists Gordon Cullen (Coventry's Lower Precinct) and William Gordon (Basildon), the latter a massive abstract lost in the early 1980s (Fig. 2). The Peckham Rye supermarket panel by Ivor Kamlish also dates from this period, as does the Stevenage Clock Tower panel, a stylised map (Fig. 3).¹⁴

A December 1959 article in the *Architects' Journal* welcomed this involvement of artists in the field of ceramics, saying 'Faience... has always suffered from appallingly bad design and it is gratifying to see that designers of imagination are turning their hand to this.'¹⁵ However, one of Carter's own publications, issued around 1960 with text by Diana Rowntree, commented on the challenge of designing ceramic murals: 'The tiles have a way of recording the intellectual content of a work of art. A perfectly adequate linear design in this medium can appear lacking in weight. Simplification may well appear naive.'¹⁶ By then Carter's and Pilkington's were both involved in the export of murals, the latter's renamed *House Journal* of 1960 referring to a revival of ceramic tile making with 'bursts of colour and design inside and outside of buildings throughout the world'.¹⁷

But the designs themselves, despite the example set by the Festival of Britain murals, were - like their painted counterparts - generally far from radical. At least seventeen ceramic murals (excluding those comprised solely of pattern-making tiles) were installed at British sites between 1953 and 1959, with a further fifty or so dating from the 1960s.¹⁸ The majority of designs featured stylised images relating to the commissioning body, for instance pumping equipment in Kenneth Barden's Herts & Essex Water Company (Harlow) mural, oil refining in A. B. Read's mural for Shellhaven in Essex (Fig. 4), or the huge version of a blueprint produced for Parvaux Electric Motors of Poole (1961) (Fig. 5). All these murals were by Carter's, as were the six panels made for the Physics Building at Queen Mary College, Mile End Road, London in 1960 (Fig. 6). Here the themes were: 'precessing electron or planet; cavity magnetron (variation); Lissajon Figure; Frank-Read mechanism; stereographic projection; electronic orbitals of benzene'. In a letter to the building's architects, Carter's described this as part of 'a particularly interesting contract for us'.¹⁹

The few abstract designs tend to be attributable to specific artists, albeit sometimes those working for the major manufacturers, for instance the Jackson Pollock-style mural designed by Ivor Kamlish of Carter's for a Bristol school in 1960 (now lost) (Fig. 7), although the dramatic double-height abstract mural installed at Carlisle Civic Centre in 1964 is attributable only to Pilkington's, and was an unusual venture for the firm.²⁰ More frequently this type of design was produced by an independent artist, for instance Walter Hudspith's three 1963 murals at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens; Peter Lanyon's 'The Conflict of Man with the Tides and the Sands' in the Civil Engineering Building, University of Liverpool (1960); and Dorothy Annan's series of nine murals for British Telecom, Farringdon Street, London (1960). The Hudspith, Lanyon and Annan murals have survived, but many of the 1950s and 1960s murals, especially those on external walls, have been lost, often due to the effects of weather.

The very permanency of the medium could also become a disadvantage, although an early 1960s publication by the British Ceramic Tile Council encouraged the vogue for corporate imagery:

‘ Industrial and commercial properties are faced with the need for constant maintenance – all of which adds to the overall operating costs. Ceramic tiles, with their easy cleaning advantages can do much to cut running costs, and at the same time add colour to the scene. A mural in the factory can put your staff ‘in the picture’, (be) used for instruction purposes, or just to brighten the environment. Murals to the architects design, or interpretations by the artists of the tile manufacturers are easily constructed, and will last the life of the building.’²¹

However, the loss of murals such as the late 1960s Carter’s Poole Library panel (recently put into storage by the local authority) (Fig. 8), the 1960 Pilkington’s mural for Martins Bank, Leicester and the Richards Tiles 1961 mural at the North Thames Gas Board showroom in Basildon illustrates the dangers to murals from a change of hands or company image. Of course, murals carried out in other materials, for instance then-fashionable fibreglass or concrete, were equally vulnerable.

The survival of several abstract murals carried out in repeats of a small number of patterned tiles is notable. Introduced from the late 1950s, the individual designs of these tiles were more complex than those of the earlier pattern-making tiles, and often asymmetric. In the ‘Planit’ system designed by Derek Hodgkinson for H. & R. Johnson in 1959, five random patterned tiles in thirty colours could be used in a vast number of different arrangements.²² Murals using the ‘Turinese’ range of surface textured tiles, designed by James Rushton and Leonard King for Malkin Tiles (introduced in 1961 and marketed by Johnson’s), have survived in Grimsby and Stoke-on-Trent, despite changes of ownership of the buildings on which they are mounted. Strangely, given the popularity of tile murals during the early and mid-1960s, a 1965 *Design* article by Lucien Myers looking at new developments in ceramic tiles made no reference to their use in such murals, concentrating solely on the design of individual tiles used as large-scale wall covering rather than in ‘tile pictures’.²³

Indeed, although tile murals were still being produced by Carter’s, Pilkington’s and Shaws of Darwen during the late 1960s and early 1970s, even by the mid-1960s the time of the ceramic mural had begun to pass, at least as far as the larger manufacturers were concerned. At a point of some economic difficulty for the industry, perhaps one-off murals became more trouble than they were worth, in addition to being unpopular with modern architects who generally disliked added decorative features. There were other strands in the story of postwar mural design, for instance church ceramics (notably by Adam Kossowski) and the work of young designers inspired by the work of Picasso.²⁴ These ‘Picassiettes’, as Bernard Leach initially dubbed them, decorated several London coffee bars with innovative ceramics during the 1950s and went on to create interiors for the Golden Egg restaurant chain in the 1960s.²⁵ All this work, along with other similar contemporary ceramic interiors - for instance the Turkey

Café's turkey-patterned mural (Leicester, 1968) - has now disappeared, but at the time it provided a significant counterpoint to the industrial-scale murals.²⁶

The ceramic murals of the 1950s and 1960s provided a fleeting glimpse of the breadth of decorative possibilities inherent in the built environment. The early postwar period saw great interest in the decorative arts, as a reaction to wartime austerity and lack of colour, but only those forms which could easily be incorporated into modern architectural visions - stand-alone sculptures and textured concrete for example - continued to thrive in that context from the late 1960s.²⁷ Mural painting, which shared a generally traditional subject matter with the majority of ceramic murals, also found the going tough. But the major cause of the decline of the ceramic mural may have been the industry itself, old-fashioned and a touch inflexible when the building industry needed speed and prefabrication. Although the *Ceramic Industries Journal* proudly announced the installation of a computer-designed tile mural in Nottingham's Broad Marsh shopping centre in 1974, this touch of modernity could not avert the almost complete disappearance of the large-scale ceramic mural from new British buildings.²⁸ Only the bizarre combination of underpasses and supermarkets gave much encouragement to artists in this attractive but difficult medium during the following decade.

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Notes and References

1. For instance, Doulton's exported six pictorial tile panels, each 6m high by 1.5m wide, to Singapore in 1930; they portrayed major industries and can still be seen at the old Malaysian Railway Station. My thanks to Willem Irik for this information. Doulton's also installed a series of large panels in their Lambeth showrooms in 1939; see Swale, Alan (March 1998) *Architectural Terracotta: A critical appraisal of its development and deployment*. MA dissertation, History of Ceramics, University of Staffordshire; p53. For interwar attitudes to mural painting on the part of art historians, see Willsdon, Clare A. P. (2000) *Mural Painting in Britain, 1840-1940*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p25; for the attitude of the crafts community, see

- Harrod, Tanya (1999) *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, p106.
2. Saint, Andrew (1987) *Towards a Social Architecture: the role of school-building in post-war England*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press; see p81.
 3. Jackson, Lesley (1991) "Contempt and Contemporary" Attitudes in the Staffordshire Ceramics Industry during the 1950s. *Decorative Arts Society Journal*, 15, pp20-28.
 4. Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture*, p92.
 5. Thomas, Mark Hartland (1951) *The Souvenir Book of Crystal Designs*. London, HMSO.
 6. Alley, Ronald (1965) *Victor Pasmore: Retrospective Exhibition, 1925-65*. London, Tate Gallery. See also Hawkins, Jennifer (1980) *The Poole Potteries*, London, Barrie & Jenkins, p179.
 7. Pasmore, Victor (1976) A Jazz Mural, p102 in Banham, Mary and Hillier, Bevis (eds.) (1976) *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*. London, Thames and Hudson. Pasmore found the actual process of working with tiles rather difficult. He distressed the craftsmen by refusing to have the tiles 'pointed', explaining 'we were not tiling a swimming pool, but constructing a jazz painting'. The design was copied on to the tiles for firing in small sections in a tiny workroom, with the result that the artist could never see the whole picture; when the complete work was set down on the ground, Pasmore wanted to rearrange it, but this proved too costly.
 8. Arber, Katie (2002) Peggy Angus, designer of modern tiles for a modern Britain. *Decorative Arts Society Journal*, 26, pp120-134.
 9. Hawkins, *Poole Potteries*, p181.
 10. Carter Archive, Poole Museum Service, CP269.
 11. Casey, Andrew (2001) *20th Century Ceramic Designers in Britain*. Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club, p236.
 12. Hayward, Leslie with Atterbury, Paul, ed. (2002) *Poole Pottery: Carter & Company and their Successors, 1873-2002*. Shepton Beauchamp, Richard Dennis, 3rd ed, pp174-5. Ledger also carried out three commissions for ceramic reredoses, in 1955 (two) and 1966, with painting by Phyllis Butler, but these are outside the scope of this article. See Carter Archive, Poole Museum Service, CP132, CP 135 and Env 26.
 13. (1955) The Artist in Tilemaking. *Hot Pot: A Newsletter from Pilkington's Tiles Ltd*, Spring, p4.
 14. Pearson, Lynn (2003) Postwar Tile Panels: An Endangered Species? *Glazed Expressions*, 46, pp3-5.
 15. (1959) *Architects' Journal*, vol 130, 3rd December, p635.
 16. Rowntree, Diana (1960) *Pattern: Carter Publication 82*. Poole, Carter Group of Companies.

17. (1960) A thing of beauty. *House Journal of Pilkington's Tiles Ltd*, 1, 21, p8.
18. Details of the tile murals have been extracted from the Carter Archive, Poole Museum Service; the house journals of Pilkington's Tiles Ltd; correspondence with Ivor Kamlish; trade journals and other contemporary publications; the location database of the Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society; and from visits to extant murals.
19. Carter Archive, Poole Museum Service, CP720.
20. (1965), Civic Centre. *Architects' Journal*, vol 141, 14th April, pp883-898.
21. (1963) *Britain's Ceramic Tiles*. British Ceramic Tile Council.
22. (1959) *Architects' Journal*, vol 130, 21st May, p760.
23. Myers, Lucien (1965) Variety and vitality in ceramic tiles. *Design*, 195, pp28-35. The article began with the sentence: 'As a nation we are not tile conscious.'
24. Adam Kossowski's work at Aylesford (Kent) and elsewhere is described in (1990) *Adam Kossowski: Murals and Paintings*. London, Armelle Press. Also notable in the field of church ceramics are Robert Brumby (work at St Augustine's R. C. Church, Manchester, 1968); Norman and Anna Adams (work at Our Lady of Lourdes R. C. Church, Milton Keynes, 1976) and William Gordon of the Walton Pottery, Chesterfield, whose mural at St Aidan's Church, Leicester was carried out around the same time as his 1958 Basildon mural for Carter's. In addition, the designer Robert Stewart (1924-95) produced a series of ceramic murals in Scotland between the early 1960s and the late 1970s; see Arthur, Liz (2003) *Robert Stewart: Design 1946-95*. London, A. & C. Black.
25. Harrod, *Crafts in Britain*, pp266-9; Partington, Matthew (2002) Espresso, Exoticism and Earthenware: The London coffee bar ceramics of the Picassoettes (William Newland, Margaret Hine and Nicholas Vergette), 1952-1966. Paper given at the Design History Society Conference.
26. From the late 1960s onward the mural work of Kenneth and Ann Clark, and Philippa Threlfall helped keep the medium alive at a time when tiled underpasses were perhaps the most common form of public ceramic installation, before the 1990s and especially the millennium saw something of a revival in mural making; however, the post-1970 period is beyond the scope of this article.
27. For a discussion of concrete finishes, see Eastwick-Field, John and Stillman, John (1959) Out of the Form. *Architectural Review*, vol 125 pp386-397.
28. (1974) Mural expresses computer art. *Ceramic Industries Journal*, 84, 989, pp9.