Japanese Majolica Tiles in Inter-war India: Modernization, Sanitization, and Beautification of the National Landscape
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30

Introduction
Japanese decorative tiles (so-called majolica) were actively exported to Asian regions (Taiwan, China, the Straits Settlements, and so on) between the 1920s and 1930s along with different miscellaneous commodities. It has been generally understood in relation to Japan’s colonization of Asia. However, India was actually the biggest export market for the pre-war Japanese tile industry.

Objectives
- Evaluate the actual status of the tile trade between India and Japan in the inter-war period
- Recount the significance of India-Japan relations in a globalized network of late colonial Asia
- Present a new empirical perspective in which modernity and nationalism in colonial Asia were molded through the manifold interactions of consumption and identity representation

Methods
- Identify the country of manufacture of tiles used in the architectural heritage of two regions: Calcutta – the former capital of British India; Rajasthan – the homeland of a successful mercantile community in the region
- Analyze trade statistics in the inter-war ceramic sector of India and Japan to prove an increasing presence to each other in a socio-economic context
- Decode the designs of tiles to examine Japan’s market strategy and the formation of India’s integrated visual identity

Examination
Case 1: Hindu temple in Calcutta (early 20th century)
- Hindu mythological subjects, flowers and birds
- The back of a tile has a trademark and the letters “MADE IN JAPAN” and “SAJI TILEWORKS”

Case 2: Merchant house in Rajasthan (1928)
- Hindu mythological subjects and floral motifs
- Ground plan shows a trademark with the letters “DK” (Danto Kikuji Co. or Corporation) and the letters “MADE IN JAPAN”

Trade Statistics
Value of imports of pottery and earthenware into British India

Discussion
- The increasing significance of India encouraged the Japanese tile manufacturers to develop new designs particularly for Indian consumers
- Popular art in print was commonly used by Indian agencies giving an iconographical model
- Popular subjects were Hindu goddesses that signified ideal beauty and morality of India
- Hindu images depicted in Japanese tiles helped Indian people to share common aestheticism in the nationalistic movement

Conclusion
- In colonial India, tiles were popularized to improve public health conditions by the British government
- With the rise of nationalism, Indian people voluntarily began to sanitize their living environment by using tiles to object the colonizers’ claim for India’s backwardness
- The boycott of British goods increased the share of Japanese tiles
- As means of nationalism propaganda, Indian (or Hindu) images were desired in Japanese tile designs
- India’s demand for tiles also helped the development of the pre-war Japanese tile industry
- The spread of common visual images through tiles rather than expensive printed art in relation to sanitary improvement resulted in shaping an integrated identity and ideology of people of India as a modern nation-state at village level