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Reviving İznik tiles after 400 years

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The art and craftsmanship of İznik tiles have long been lost when the golden ages of the Ottoman Empire came to an end. It was the İznik Foundation, through hard work and careful research that revived the art and made it popular around the world. Currently, famous artists and architects collaborate with the foundation with their designs and use the tiles in their works

Lost and forgotten for 400 years after fall of the Ottoman Empire, İznik tiles are enjoying a comeback thanks to the work of a Turkish foundation.

The tiles, known for their intricate and expensive craftsmanship, now decorate the home of Calvin Klein, along with hotels and residences around the globe. A new Oxford Center for Islamic Studies is also set to feature the tiles, employing the custom-designs of well-known artists and architects such as Zaha Hadid.

The foundation began producing İznik tiles for the first time in 400 years, said Professor Işıl Akbaygil, founder and director of the İznik Foundation. Producing the tiles is difficult and expensive. They have mainly survived because they were used in architecture, said Akbaygil. She cites buildings designed by famous Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, the Sultanahmet Mosque in Istanbul and the Rüstem Paşa Palace in Istanbul as containing the most beautiful samples of İznik tiles. The tiles were used in palaces and big mosques in the 16th century in the Ottoman Empire. It was a very expensive product. So once palaces ceased to be built, the craftsmanship of İznik tiles began to die off, said Akbaygil.

What sets İznik tiles apart from any other style of tile is that they have quartz on both the front and back. The paint used to decorate the tiles is made especially by the foundation, mixing metal oxides and quartz. Ordinary tiles, on the other hand, contain mass-produced ceramic dyes.

A semi-precious stone

Quartz is a semi-precious stone and a very valuable ingredient, just like a jewel. When it is used in palaces or mosques, it replaces gold. That is why it is so valuable. But it is also very suitable for today's world because it is an ecological element. It is important in meditation and is considered a healing material in Europe and the United States, Akbaygil explained.

She added that the tiles also act as an important part of the architecture of a building, noting, "It is not only a work of art. We also turned it into a material that has a place in modern architecture." She explained that Peter Marino, who is also the architect of Louis Vuitton's fashion house, used İznik tiles when building the residence of the American fashion giant Calvin Klein.

The foundation is also collaborating on the decoration of the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies. "We collaborate with their architects. But for this project, we are also collaborating with Prince Charles, who is heading the project. He loves İznik tiles, said Akbaygil. She said the project has a special significance for her. The center is very important. It will serve as an educational center for the whole Muslim community, so to have the tiles made here is very important."

Akbaygil first came across the long-forgotten İznik tiles in 1989 while she was the dean of Istanbul University's Faculty of Social Sciences, which included an archaeology department. A group of archaeologists from the university were conducting excavations of İznik tiles and decided to gather their work in an exhibition. Even though the İznik tiles were known all around the world, they were not well-known in Turkey back then. The Turkish Economy Bank became our sponsor. The original aim was to exhibit the pieces that were found, but it got bigger and a book followed," said Akbaygil.

Akbaygil decided to revive the age-old Turkish traditional art, establishing the foundation in 1993, followed by a research and development center in Istanbul in 1995. "We did only research and development between 1995 and 1997, she said.

Akbaygil gathered experts from many fields " professors from the university, chemical engineers, professors from Princeton University, and masters of tile making from Kütahya, another Turkish city known for its traditional tiles. "But most importantly the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) supported us. They analyzed every piece we produced to determine whether it was crafted correctly. We had both professionals and amateurs working on the project. But it was not anyone's precise area of expertise," she said.

Traditional art meets modern architecture

Akbaygil has found that people who properly understand Western culture tend to appreciate Eastern cultures and thus show great interest in İznik tiles. "Some of the motifs date back to the 1st century B.C. in China. These motifs were later transported to Anatolia and had found magnificent expression in İznik tiles. It is not possible for it not to impress people," she said. Akbaygil believes that Anatolia is a very special place because it served as the place where Eastern and Western art met. İznik tiles have become a symbol of this adaptation, of using traditional art in modern architecture. It is why they have become so popular, said Akbaygil.

The foundation's office in Kuruçeşme, Istanbul serves as a showroom and design office, whereas the office in İznik is where the production takes place. "We learn a lot from the 16th century, offer what we have learned to designers, and they come up with their own designs," said Akbaygil of the work of local artists. Famous artists and architects, such as Zaha Hadid, collaborate with the foundation in producing their tile designs. The foundation's products are sold at outlets in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and in the United States.

Other projects for İznik

The city of İznik, which served as the capital for three empires, is very important for us," said Akbaygil, adding that the foundation's goal encompasses more than just success in reviving the tiles. "İznik used to be a city of Muslim theologians and scholars. There was a strong culture of art in the city. Our second aim is to establish musical education here, she said, explaining the foundation will be holding its third viola camp in the city this year. Akbaygil says the foundation would also like to establish a school for composers in the city. Another foundation project is to turn İznik into an important center for design.

As an economics professor, Akbaygil has taken Ottoman guilds and foundations as a model. It had to be institutionalized, so I established a foundation. It was the same way in the Ottomans. But instead of the guild, we organized our work under a foundation," she said. The financial structure of the foundation is also modeled after foundations in Ottoman times. "Ottoman foundations did not receive income from the state. It can go only so far with donations. People would donate real estate or shops to generate income for foundations," said Akbaygil, adding that the Turkish government did offer emotional support to the foundation, and that the Foreign Ministry has helped with its promotion abroad.

One issue that saddens Akbaygil is that the foundation's home in Istanbul, a building in Kuruçeşme, has been sold. She hopes that the new owner will not ask them to move out but will let them stay. "We have been here for more than 10 years. The painting as well as the design of the tiles is made in the Istanbul office, so we need a large space, she said. The foundation's Istanbul office also serves as an educational institute for graduates of design schools who have received formal training need more practical instruction. I hope they do not ask us to move out, so that we can continue with our work, said Akbaygil.