

Ceramics in the Architecture of St. Petersburg

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Like any other city on earth, St. Petersburg has its own unique, instantly recognizable face and spirit. In a visual landscape dominated by dramatic monuments and impressive cathedrals, it is the works of decorative art that really make the city shine. Glazed tile stoves, maiolica panels and wrought iron railings and window and door treatments all contribute to the city's distinctive sense of place and time.

I'd like to show you some of decorative ceramics that I find personally meaningful. I was born in St. Petersburg and the city has contributed a great deal to the formation of my taste as an artist. I think these are works that will definitely show you a different side of the city.

The history of ceramics in Russian architecture actually dates back to long before the arrival of European-style interiors and facades. Archaeologists have found beautiful ceramic tiles when excavating some of Russia's oldest churches. The tiles are glazed with different colors and show people dressed in period costumes, birds, flowers and a variety of ornaments.



Tiles. XVII - XVIII centuries

Older churches were often built in the Byzantine tradition using plinthite. Painted and glazed tiles are also featured in buildings dating to the 16th and 17th centuries in Moscow, Yaroslavl and other cities. Since Petersburg was founded fairly late, in 1703, we can definitely say that it inherited an existing tradition. What it went on to do with that tradition, however, was entirely original.

St. Petersburg's decorative ceramics reflect an organic integration of Russia's rich artistic traditions and borrowed European heritage.

There's obviously no way I can cover all of the works of ceramic art that are deserving of your attention. What I want to do is show you some of what I consider to be the most interesting works, hopefully getting you interested in St. Petersburg and giving you some clues to its visual landscape should you have the chance to visit.

So let's look back to St. Petersburg in the 18th century. Peter the Great led a construction boom that delivered its first achievements within the decade. One of the most architecturally and

artistically significant buildings of the period is the palace built by Alexander Menshikov, who was a close confidant of the Tsar. The style of this building reflects the stately, royal image that Peter the Great was attempting to create in his new city on the Neva.



Menshikov Palace. XVIII century

The palace was designed by European architects, including Giovanni Fontana and Gottfried Schadel, with the clean lines and imperial elegance of what we call early Petrine Baroque. What's interesting about this style is that the very austere facades are really compensated for by the opulence of the interiors, which is something you won't find in European buildings from the same period. There are very classic stoves finished in cobalt tiles, but those same blue and white Delft-style tiles are also used to cover entire walls and ceilings, while in Holland tiles were only used to decorate inserts and panels.

Four rooms in the Menshikov Palace still have tiled walls and ceilings, with 27,810 blue and white painted ceramic tiles arranged in eight thematic series. The tiles feature an endless variety of subject matter, combinations and placement on the walls and ceilings.

Menshikov ordered his tiles direct from Holland, but there were pottery workshops at brick factories around St. Petersburg that also offered painted tiles.

The Delft tile trend actually started in France, when King Louis XIV commissioned the Grand Trianon, a chateau on the grounds of Versailles that featured a facade decorated entirely in Delft tile.

St. Petersburg's first tiled interiors date to around 1710. By 1720, tiles were widely used to finish interiors in Peter the Great's Winter and Summer Palaces, as well as his country retreats and the homes of other court nobility.

There were a number of reasons for this sudden increase in the use of tile. People expected their rooms to be decorative and utilitarian at the same time, and they liked the way that tiles kept out moisture in St. Petersburg's damp, cold climate. But most importantly, tile was beautiful and it was in fashion.

The delicate gleam of blue and white Delft tiles with gilded details and gold nail heads on the ceiling, paired with large windows and mirrors and bright spots of amber, created a light, clean interior that reflected a new emphasis on comfort and hygiene, as well as a desire for brilliance and beauty.

Many of St. Petersburg's most impressive palaces, cathedrals and other buildings were built in the Empire style of the first half of the 19th century. Even today you will find that most city residents are familiar with the names of the era's leading architects: Rossi, Zakharov, Stasov, and Quarenghi. In those days, architects also designed their buildings' interiors, including things like furniture, light fixtures and fireplaces.

Marble overtook tile in popularity by the 19th century, but ceramics continued to play an important

role in Russia's distinctive architecture. The new field of archaeology was exposing designers to unique works of medieval architecture and decorative art, including religious ornamentation, glazed tiles and smalt glass mosaics. Archaeological discoveries really did have an enormous influence on the development of a singular Russian style of decorative architecture. A good example is the Church of the Savior on Blood, designed by architect Alfred Parland and completed in 1907.



Church of the Savior on Blood. XX century

Tsar Alexander III commissioned the church to be built on the site where his father Alexander II, was assassinated, and he wanted it to reflect 17th century Russian architectural style.

Parland, who was born in Russia to English parents, resurrected the tradition of “Muscovite pattern-work,” with lavish decoration and fine detail superimposed over a complex spatial composition and intricate decor.

When you look at the church, you see a fairy-tale palace woven from millions of mosaic panels produced by Russia's best artists.

In addition to vibrant colors, the glazed tiles in the Church of the Savior have amazing plasticity. The lines of every vase, flower petal and bird feather are presented in relief, raised in the center and spreading out to the edges in a decorative technique that makes the images seem more three-dimensional. By combining this gorgeous palette of colors with a very sculptural use of volume, the maiolica comes alive and the images gain authenticity.

All of the church's maiolica tiles serve an ornamental purpose. Instead of creating a repeating motif, the tiles feature infinitely interwoven images surrounding the central composition, creating an independent work of ornament within each separate tile.

Looking ahead to the 20th century, we see ceramic art flourishing under the influences of historicism and modernism. The industrial revolution also played a part, because fantastically wealthy industrialists were often art patrons. Every affluent or even middle class Russian home had a tile stove. At the same time, ceramic art breaks out of interior design and starts showing up on building facades.

The 20th century was a time of renaissance in the use of decorative arts in architecture. In St. Petersburg, which is one of Russia's youngest cities, you can find maiolica in both religious and secular buildings representing a diverse range of styles and schools.

When you look at the overall landscape in St. Petersburg, you get a feel for how Byzantine style remained very relevant in religious architecture, even as all the new trends in architecture started gaining traction in the early 20th century. That combination of the Byzantine and the modern comes together extremely organically to give you what is essentially an original - and modern - Russian style and flavor.

Possibly the most impressive example of this blend of styles is the Naval Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Kronstadt, near St. Petersburg, which was built in 1903–1913.



Naval Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Kronstadt. XX century

What you see here is that the stylization and artistic perfection of the ornamental maiolica tiles at the Naval Cathedral put them on an equal footing with any work of fine art. The Church of Our Lady of Kazan at the Resurrection Novodevichy Convent, built in 1907–1914, is another wonderful example of adapted Byzantine architecture in St. Petersburg.



Church of Our Lady of Kazan at the Resurrection Novodevichy Convent. XX century

This new, blended style is even more apparent at the Church of Our Lady of Kazan than at the Naval Cathedral, and the very refined, almost Art Nouveau adaptation of Byzantine architecture carries over into the church's interior.

While the church's decoration is obviously Byzantine in its roots, you can feel an artistic presence, as well. The traditional Christian imagery merges with the graphic traditions of Art Nouveau and elements of national color to create a space that is uniquely modern, relevant and interesting.

In a city already rich with architectural monuments, there is one especially distinctive and impressive building that captivates visitors with its unearthly beauty. I like to think of it as a very romantic attempt to restore the grandeur of Islamic architecture in an Art Nouveau vein. The building I'm talking about is the Cathedral Mosque, built in 1908–1913.



Cathedral Mosque. XX century

The Cathedral Mosque was patterned after the Gur-e Amir Mosque in Samarkand, the 15th century resting place of Tamerlane.

The architects who designed the Cathedral Mosque were able to achieve an intensely organic overall artistic impression by using maiolica as a structural element of the building. Tiles make up the large central dome and the smaller minarets, as well as the north and south portals.

Instead of copying existing designs, St. Petersburg artists developed dozens of original Arab-style ornaments for the Cathedral Mosque's maiolica. The shades of deep navy, vivid turquoise, subtle terracotta, rose and gold, all with delicate flecks of black, orange and claret red, draw the viewer into an infinite spiral of stylized Persian ornament.

The design work was led by talented artist and ceramist Petr Vaulin, whose work contributed so much to the character of maiolica decoration in St. Petersburg at the turn of the 19th century. Vaulin's workshop was also responsible for the only monumental work of Neo-Russian ceramic art still in existence in St. Petersburg - the portal of the library of the Institute of Experimental Medicine.



Library of the Institute of Experimental Medicine. XX century

This is another example where maiolica is used as a crucial architectural component to the building, instead of just decoration, and that gives the library a very special, unique look. I've tried to give you a taste of what St. Petersburg has to offer in terms of decorative and sculptural ceramic art, and I hope that, even though I'm only showing you a small sample of what's out there, you'll be inspired to learn more about the artistic traditions of my city.