

California Art Tile in Curtis Park

by Erik Fay

Many of us in Curtis Park are privileged to live in well-preserved and attractive 1920s subdivisions. Hallmarks of 1920s neighborhoods in California include revival style houses, especially Spanish Colonial or Tudor, that often include citrus trees, red tile roofs, wrought iron rails, and decorative beams. Among the most historically significant of California architectural details, found in homes large and small, are art tiles.

Decorative styles in California change often and overnight, but tile has remained a constant since Spanish colonists began making terra-cotta tiles in what was then Alta California. Revival of Spanish and Old California styles became popular after the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego. When the later subdivisions of Curtis Park were developed during the booming 1920's, Hollywood, home decorating magazines, real estate developers, and furniture manufacturers made Spanish, Mexican, and Moorish themes the style for California homeowners.

California, until about 1940, was the leading producer of utilitarian, art, and architectural terra cotta tile in the United States. More than 40 companies produced art or commercial tiles in California between 1910 and 1940. Historically significant names include Malibu Potteries, Catalina Pottery, Gladding McBean and Company, Batchelder Tile Company, Pacific Clay Products, Taylor Tilery, D & M Tile Company, and Hispano-Moresque Tiles. Many smaller companies also produced a variety of roof and other commercial tiles. One of the smaller producers, California Pottery Company of Merced, produced the multi-hued roof tiles found on many Spanish Colonial homes in Curtis Park.

Gladding McBean Company, located in Lincoln, is probably the company most Sacramentans associate with California tile, and often mistakenly believe manufactured the tile in their homes. The Lincoln location never produced art tile or pottery but focused solely on clay processing, sewer pipe manufacturing (of which there is a lot in Sacramento) and intricate architectural elements that grace the façades of many fine public and commercial buildings throughout the western United States. Gladding operated a plant in Hermosa Beach, and later in Glendale, that solely produced its art tiles, pottery, and Franciscan dishware. Gladding processed a large amount of red clay that was sold and transported by rail to other California tile manufacturers for their use, so much Lincoln clay was spread across the state in one form or another.

Curtis Park has one of the finest collections of Spanish Colonial homes in Sacramento's early suburbs, resulting in a notable representation of California tile. English/Tudor Revival and "Story Book" style homes from the 1920's frequently used the same tiles found in many Spanish Colonial homes. Many of these homes have, or had prior to remodeling, California tile in their floors, stairs, entries, kitchens, or bathrooms (the tile showplace for a 1920's home).

Original bathrooms and kitchens often display a bold palate of colorful tiles used on walls, as baseboards, around tubs, and on kitchen backsplashes. Art tiles, in addition to

their brilliant colors, often have images of tropical birds, flowers, leaves, Spanish galleons, horses, sunsets, western scenes, missions, and other themes. Tiles from the late 1920's and early 1930's often reflect the emerging Art Moderne and Streamline styles with bold geometric patterns rather than the traditional European Revival or Western motifs.

California art tiles also frequently decorate fireplaces and hearths. Tiles used on fireplaces tend to be of deep earth tones and copper shades with other images interspersed. A fireplace covered in rare California tile images can add thousands of dollars in value to a house.

Public and commercial buildings made extensive use of California art tile. The Sierra II Center has a superb tiled entry, possibly from Solon & Schemmel (sometimes stamped "S & S") Tiles of San Jose. The old Spanish style Safeway building at the corner of 4th and Franklin has rare Spanish Moderne style in art tile on its ground floor. Other local examples include the Oak Park Library, the original Bret Harte Elementary School, and Curtis Park's Christian Brothers High School. The former Alhambra Theater was a showplace of California art tile. The theater has since been replaced by a Sateway store, but at the southern end of the Safeway parking lot, the original California tile waterfall that was once a focal point of the theater's gardens still stands.

You can see wonderful California art tile on the exterior of homes. You may sometimes have to look closely as some examples are unfortunately covered by paint, but others are striking in their original form. A Mediterranean Revival home on Montgomery Avenue features a pair of Batchelder (Los Angeles) or Muresque (Oakland) tile fountains in the front porch. A Spanish Rancho home on East Curtis Avenue features a rare round floral tile in a recessed porch niche. Several Spanish style homes near Rochon Way have unique tile insets.

The California tile industry ended with the Great Depression, the World War II conversion of the many tile manufacturers to utilitarian porcelain manufacturers, and the rise of modernist design. Modernist designers stressed function and clean lines over elegant beauty, and soon images of missions and peacocks gave way to metal accents, sheet glass, and white paint. In recent years, much California tile has probably met its fate in kitchen remodels, losing out to ubiquitous granite slabs.

Interest in California Art Tile is definitely on the rise. The California Heritage Museum, Los Angeles County Museum, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art have recently hosted exhibits focusing in part on 1920's and 1930's California pottery and tiles. Several groups in Southern California cities now offer architectural tours devoted in part to art tile. Antique dealers sell 1920's California tiles at prices ranging from \$2 to \$200 per tile. Diane Keaton and Barbara Streisand have amassed significant collections of California tiles. Ms. Keaton recently restored her 1920's Spanish Rancho home using only vintage California tile. Most significant, several tile manufacturers have begun to reproduce original 1920's tile designs; you can now restore your home's original tile design if it went missing and was replaced by Formica.

Excellent resources for folks interested in restoring their kitchen or bath to 1920's

design include Mission Tile West, BW Tile, and Monterey Ceramic Tile. Each of these resources has a Southern California showroom and a website, and offer very good customer service. Several highly recommended coffee table books have recently been published on the subject and provide an opportunity to view the scope of this once thriving California art form and to identify the existing tile in your home.

We have lost much of our history not just to wrecking balls and misguided 1960's urban redevelopment, but also to homeowners not being aware of the history, art, and value in their homes. We live in a beautiful historic neighborhood. Take a closer and you may be amazed by historic details and artful beauty that is too easily taken for granted.

REFERENCES:

American Art Tile, by Norman Karlson

California Pottery from Mission to Modernism, by Bill Stern

Bauer - Classic American Pottery, by Mitch Tuchman

RESOURCES:

Tile Heritage Foundation: <http://www.tileheritage.org/>

COMING SOON:

Photos of Curtis Park Art Tiles to be posted on the Sierra 2 website.