

ABOVE: Collection | *Grammar of Ornament - India ii*, 2021

Visits to the Jackfield Tile Museum in Ironbridge inspired *Frances Priest* to experiment with a range of work in bold, colourful designs

Potters on Pots: Frances Priest

We had a fantastic art department at the school I attended in West Yorkshire. One of the department teachers, Brian Halton, introduced me to ceramics, the usual pinch pots and coil building. I went on to make a relief panel of a drystone wall covered in plants, spending all my spare time in the department, becoming obsessed by the details of mosses, ferns and succulents all in clay.

After my A levels, I spent a year on a Foundation Course at Dewsbury College. I was fortunate to be taught by renowned ceramic artist David Roberts. He was a fantastic tutor, encouraging me to continue to study ceramics at degree level at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA). The teaching at ECA was very broad and we were encouraged to be experimental with materials and process. The tutors and technicians – Tony Franks, Mick Brettell, Sarah-Jane Selwood, Clare Twomey and Craig Mitchell – all pursued their own practice and we had lots of interesting visiting lecturers including Ken Eastman, Kate Malone, Richard Slee, Alison Britton and Annie Cattrell.

In my third year, we made a pilgrimage to Stoke-on-Trent at a time when there was still some significant manufacturing to see. My favourite memory is visiting an insulator factory and watching ribbons of clay snaking through the air as a man on a ladder carved ribs into a spinning block of clay. It was an extraordinary sight that crystallised the possibilities of working with clay at scale and highlighted the hybrid nature of the material, at once highly functional and supremely sculptural.

My work today explores cultural histories of ornament and pattern. I combine a studio-based ceramic practice with sited projects that use the languages of ornament to explore interwoven elements of place and community. Central to the work is an interest in pattern books as a means of documenting and disseminating these languages. My pieces reflect upon the ever-changing interpretations of ornamental motifs as they move

between drawing and material form. All of my work is grounded in research, whether it be a pattern book, a museum collection or a location.

My studio work is made using handbuilding and press-moulding techniques using a white firing clay body with added molochite. I work at a variety of scales, creating forms that are paired back into a refined shape, smoothed to a pristine canvas and then inscribed with pattern and decorative details. I use a scalpel blade and a combination of paper stencils and plotters, hand-formed aluminium stamps and freehand details to create the patterns.

When the drawing is complete, the work is left to slowly dry and then bisque-fired. I gently polish the fired surface with a diamond pad then paint with an oxide wash that is sponged back to highlight the inscribed line drawings. Colour is added though a combination of glazes and vitreous slips, which give a variety of surface finishes, from high gloss though to flat matte. These are applied using fine brushes, building up layers of colour over multiple firings. After the final glaze-firing, I sometimes add another layer of drawing using enamel decals made from scans of my original drawings. I try to think of ceramic surfaces in the same way as I work on paper, using pen, watercolour, gouache and collage. Glaze tests and multiple firings are an important part of achieving this.

In 2018, I collaborated with tile manufacturer Craven Dunnill Jackfield on *The Tiled Corridor*, commissioned by Edinburgh & Lothian Health Foundation for The Royal Edinburgh Hospital. It covers 35 sq metres and incorporates over 2000 tiles manufactured by Craven Dunnill Jackfield from my hand-carved plaster originals, plus 300 handmade in my Edinburgh studio. I was awarded a QEST Scholarship in 2020 to further develop my knowledge of tile-making techniques, working with Craven Dunnill Jackfield to learn about encaustic floor and moulded wall tile production.



ABOVE: Tile panel by Minton Hollins & Co., 1875–1910, the John Scott Tile Collection, Jackfield Tile Museum

BELOW: *The Tiled Corridor*, The Royal Edinburgh Hospital

While researching *The Tiled Corridor*, I visited the Jackfield Tile Museum in Ironbridge to look at its archive and collections with help from collection curator Gillian Crumpton. My favourite space in the museum is the John Scott Tile Collection, which was bequeathed in 2013 by renowned decorative arts collector John Scott. The collection covers British manufactured tiles from the 19th and 20th centuries, from Pugin-designed encaustics to studio tiles by Ann and Kenneth Clarke.

Browsing the collection, I discovered some stunning examples of majolica tiles by Minton and Maw & Co., which stopped me in my tracks. To me, they represent the very height of excellence in Victorian tile design and manufacturing, retaining a boldness of colour and form that is timeless. The carving of the tiles is exquisite, using contoured forms to hold the multiple glaze colours in place, and intricate details to create depth and tonal differences. The colour palette combined with the relief carving is joyful and enticing, making it impossible to resist touching the tiles.

During my QEST Scholarship, it has been these tiles that I have returned to again and again, inspired by both their unique design and exemplary craftsmanship. The factory sits on the same site as the museum, which is the original Craven Dunnill Tileworks. It has been a huge privilege to have the collection on hand as I work my way along the factory floor. The place is steeped in history and it cannot fail to permeate the work being made there today.

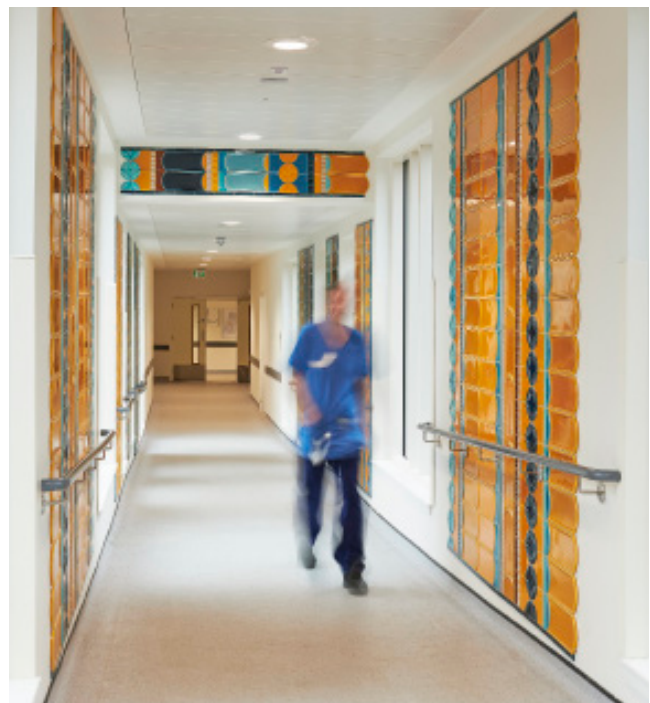
These tiles have been hugely influential to the work I have made during the scholarship, both in their technical execution and style. I adore the bold use of colour and the richness of the motifs. The designs are enduring and exemplify the beauty ceramic tiles can bring to the built environment. Working closely with the skilled team at Craven Dunnill Jackfield, I have been able to study these tiles with their expertise on hand to help me understand how they were made.

I have been working for a number of years with a pattern book called *The Grammar of Ornament*, by Victorian architect and designer Owen Jones. The book was produced as a compendium of pattern to inform and

inspire better quality design and products from British manufacturers. When I first saw the Minton panel (pictured above) it reminded me of motifs from the chromolithographic pages of the book, synthesising decorative details from multiple sources and using a bold colour scheme to create a striking design. The specific designer of this panel is not known, however, the influence of Owen Jones is very clear.

Ceramics in the built environment have a longevity and beauty like no other material, retaining a freshness of appeal, brightness of colour and irresistible tactility. The many examples of Victorian architectural ceramics in historic buildings are a testament to this. By working within this tradition, embedding items of beauty into the fabric of buildings, I hope I am making a positive contribution to the quality of our contemporary built environment, adding joyful details at a human scale to new buildings that will last many lifetimes. **ER**

For more details visit francespriest.co.uk; cdjackfield.com; ironbridge.org.uk



Images: courtesy of the artist; Jackfield Tile Museum; Shannon Tofts