



ROYAUME DU MAROC
Ministère du Tourisme, de Transport
Aérien, de l'Artisanat
Et de l'Economie Sociale
Secrétariat d'Etat Chargée de l'Artisanat
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Meknès



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The craft of traditional ceramics (zellige)

The craft of traditional ceramics is delicate and complex, it requires special skills and a thorough knowledge of the different stages of the production process. It is a traditional ancestral creative craft, it is one of the most expressive artistic forms related to Moroccan architecture. Moreover, it has been described by some ancient maalems as being the best Arab craft to decorate sumptuous buildings, palaces and mosques ...

This craft originated in Andalusia, it was introduced by Arab maalems, especially Moorish. The latter arrived in Morocco and settled in some cities like Fez, which saw its name associated with the creation of Zellige. His fame has transcended boundaries thanks to the beauty and accuracy of his features that fascinate his observers.

The zelligefassi's trade flourished during the Merinid Dynasty, he experienced the introduction of colors: blue, green, yellow and red, which gave rise to a new activity in the city and placed him among trades related to traditional architectural arts. Which have retained their authenticity and aesthetics despite the significant growth experienced by Moroccan architecture, changes and fluctuations in the availability of raw materials.

Traditional ceramics depend on simple raw materials and primitive tools (clay, sun, wooden planks, a special oven, natural colors, specific wooden hammers ... etc). It is also based on the skill and mastery of the craftsman as well as on a particular type of skilled workforce, and this through three basic steps:

The manufacture of tiles:

The first step in this process is the preparation of pure clay (a mixture of blue and yellow clay) by soaking it for a long time in the water inside the ponds, it is then crushed before using it to form tiles by pouring it into molds placed on the flat floor of the workshop hall. After drying in the sun, the tiles are transported to spaces next to the workshop for storage. The craftsmen cut them into definite shapes and put them back to dry a second time.

During this stage, other tiles are fired in ovens (about 8000 square pieces). This process requires a great deal of attention from the craftsman, who monitors the cooking of the tiles for 24 hours until they are taken out the next day.



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Parallel to this operation, these pieces are painted by a mixture whose composition is known only by the master craftsman, and the painting depends either on customer requirements, or the availability of raw materials. The tiles are then baked a second time, when they come out of the ovens, they are sorted according to the color and the cooking. This process usually takes place during the summer to benefit from the warm climate and store the maximum number of tiles for use during the winter. Especially since the craftsman produces mainly for the use of his customers (who are none other than the craftsmen responsible for the laying of zellige) whose orders are numerous between the months of March and July, period during which the workshops work laying tiles in buildings.

The size of the tiles in the form of small geometric pieces:

The dried clay tiles are manually cut with a hammer for this purpose called " Menkach ", they are cut into tesserae (small pieces called Form), they interlock and form a pattern that meets the standards of drawings and scribes conform to the originals and which respects all the rules of Islamic art architecture. This process normally takes place in smaller workshops than the previous ones and employs workers or tailors concentrated in the same neighborhood. The reason being to take advantage of the proximity of tile producers and distribute the tasks between them so that everyone can get down to the job they control best.

- The first craftsman draws and traces the desired geometric shapes on the tiles;
- The second step is to cut the tiles according to the tracing and requires a great experience to optimize the surface of the tile and to limit the breakage;
- In the third and final step, the craftsman chamfered the tesserae so that the assembly proceeded normally.

It should be noted that the size of small pieces requires specific techniques known only to professionals. Size and sculpture are the secret of this profession added to a set of specificities that can only be achieved through a wealth of experience and skills acquired by professionals in the field.

The final pose of the tesserae (Tefrach):



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This stage is one of the most important in the realization of zellige and in the sequence of the prerogatives of the profession. Moreover, the experienced craftsman directly contacts the customers, he proposes the motifs and transmits the orders to the workshops that produce the tesserae. Thus, he makes a plot on the ground, poses the part dyed geometric figures of the zellige upside down from the center to the sides. Thus is reflected the competence and technicality of the Moroccan craftsman knowing that a square meter of zellige includes between 6000 and 8000 small parts.

The design has precise measurements that must be gradually adjusted to fit the wall dimensions. At the end of the part of the process on the ground, we spray the final shape of a mixture of stucco and water to hold the whole, before covering with a layer of mortar 3 centimeters thick.

Once this step is over, we cut small feet on the shape before the cement dries completely, which will allow to glue the mosaics on the wall by keeping them at a distance of 5 cm so that the maalam can pour cement between the shape and the wall thus allowing its fixation. This process lasts 4 days.

Each of these stages is carried out in separate workshops, managed by a maalam or by the owner who is at the head of about five craftsmen.

It can be seen from the above that the simplicity of the tools used corresponds to the techniques adopted for several centuries. The secret lies in the know-how and mastery of the processes of the profession which are the result of several years of learning and practice. What gave the zelligeur a good reputation within the profession in Morocco and abroad, he was thus able to preserve the stamp of zelligefassi in its manufacture and its forms in spite of the changes of times and of tastes.

This profession continues to attract the interest of artists, architects and enthusiasts of the authenticity of craftsmanship, creativity and ancestral Moroccan heritage.



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