

Joyce Kozloff: An Interior Decorated

I found myself increasingly uncomfortable with the discrepancy between the way I talked about my work and the way I saw the paintings themselves. At that time there was much discussion about breaking down the hierarchies between “high” art and crafts. And yet, I was merely using “low” art sources as subject matter for...paintings. To really question the hierarchies one would have to get involved with craft processes. Also, I was bothered by the metaphors in the work – their abstractness, a result of the transformation from decorative motif to painted image. In addition, I was grappling with the question of function. I had begun to think of my paintings as walls, but they weren’t walls. One day, I looked at them in my studio and couldn’t figure out what they were for. It was not that the paintings were invalid as art; they simply no longer reflected my thinking.

At that point I decided to move onto the walls and to decorate a room – that is, an environment in which the ornament would be literal and physically palpable. Since 1973, I had been incorporating designs from painted tiles into my work, so it seemed natural to begin working in ceramics. My processes have been simple and unexpectedly domestic: I move the same utensils back and forth from the kitchen to the studio; the clay is rolled with a rolling pin, and the tiles are cut with cookie cutters. After glazing and firing, the pieces are grouted on panels.

The most complicated and ambitious work is the floor. Though set off and raised within the gallery space, this tiled floor is functional. It contains close to a thousand hand painted stars and hexagons. I’ve painted motifs from many traditions onto these tiles: American Indian pottery, Moroccan ceramics, Viennese Art Nouveau book ornament, American quilts, Berber carpets, Caucasian kilims, Egyptian wall paintings, Iznik and Catalan tiles, Islamic calligraphy, Art Deco design, Sumerian and Romanesque carvings, Pennsylvania Dutch signs, Chinese painted porcelains, French lace patterns, Celtic illuminations, Turkish woven and brocaded silks, Seljuk brickwork, Persian miniatures and Coptic textiles. The motifs are clustered according to culture and when I made them, since I worked on the floor in sections. The entire piece is my personal anthology of the decorative arts. The stream of diamond shaped turquoise tiles flowing around the sides and through the center of the field of stars and hexagons has become, for me, a reference to water. The fluid, cool blue borders contrast with the concentrated, intense linear handwork of the hexagon and star insets.

The walls are covered with hangings that were silkscreened at The Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. The square silks were printed with different color inks on different color silks and cottons for each piece in the series – in vertical strips (4 on each piece) that are sewn together. Twenty screens were used for each piece. Their designs are of Islamic and Egyptian derivation, printed in a wide variety of colors. The long pieces, called “Tut’s Wallpaper,” are printed entirely on silk strips and all the motifs are Egyptian, inspired by the recent King Tut show at the Met. Another series of smaller lithographs, “Is It Still High Art?” (on sheets of Chinese silk backed with rice paper), was fabricated at Solo Press in New York. Between the silk panels are ceramic tile pilasters, each a different pattern. Many of these are glazed with lusters, iridescent and metallic to reflect the shimmering quality of the silks.

Joyce Kozloff, from *An Interior Decorated*, with essays by Carrie Rickey and Peg Weiss. New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1979.

My aim is to create an environment that is sumptuous but not suffocating, refined but not aesthetic, meditative but not spiritual, demanding but not pompous, repetitive but not boring. The work is not decorative merely by virtue of its hanging on a wall. Its conscious intention from the first was to decorate a specific interior, and this is its principal content.

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