

CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC ARTISTS OF KUTAHYA

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Abstract: The city of Kütahya is an important traditional production center in Turkey known for its ceramic and tile art. In this region, there is a ceramic making tradition that started with the Phrygians and continued throughout the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman Empire periods, and continues to exist in the Republic of Turkey today. The abundant availability of raw materials required for ceramic making in Kütahya and its surroundings has enabled production to continue for many years. It produced its most superior examples in the 17th and 18th centuries, and after a period of decline, it revived in the late 19th century, and with its rich product variety and continuity, it has become an important value especially in Ottoman art as Folk/City art. Kütahya tiles, which experienced their highest quality period in the 18th century, draw attention in their compositions with writing, curved branches, hatayi and rumi motifs, sliced medallions, flower motifs, human and animal figures, and geometric patterns. In addition, fish scales, clouds and peonies can be seen with Chinese influence. In recent years, Kütahya ceramics and tile art continues to create an important value with the increasing number of workshops, masters and ceramicists that have gradually increased their quality. Today, many contemporary and internationally recognized ceramic artists produce works inspired by Kütahya ceramics/tile motifs and forms. Within the scope of this research, it is aimed to determine the reflections of the artists and works that interpret famous Kütahya ceramics in their contemporary works by investigating them. A qualitative research method is applied while examining the artists and works inspired by Kütahya ceramics and tile art in the context of personal web sources, magazines, articles, books and curator comments.

Keywords: Kütahya, Tile, Traditional Art, Contemporary Art, Ceramics

INTRODUCTION

Kütahya province has always been an important ceramic center in the field of ceramics from the Chalcolithic Age to the Seljuks with its rich natural raw material resources, and ceramics, tiles and porcelain from the Seljuks to the present day. Tile art, which is among the branches of art of the Anatolian Seljuks and the Ottoman Empire and was developed during these periods, is continued by the workshops in Kütahya today. Tile art includes systematic features with its motif, composition, pattern, style, color and decoration features.

KUTAHYA CERAMIC AND TILE ART

Kütahya, which was the most important ceramic production center after İznik in the Ottoman period and was the scene of intensive ceramic production in the Phrygian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods, is a city that has kept this art alive with its traditional methods until today. Kütahya tile making, which produced its most competent examples in the 17th and 18th centuries and then declined with the decrease in production and diversity, was revived in the late 19th century and took its place among the important pieces of the Ottoman art mosaic with its rich product range and continuity as an “urban art” in a line between İznik and Çanakkale tile making (Gök, 2015:7).

It is known that in the second half of the 14th century, as in İznik, in Kütahya, productions called “Milet Work” were made in which white slip was applied to red clay and sgraffito technique was used in decoration. At the end of the 15th century, a transition to white clay began in Kütahya. With the transition to white clay, the blue-white style also began to be seen (Atay, 2007:23,24) (Figure 1). Since Kütahya production supported İznik before the 18th century, the styles used in İznik were also used here. These styles are Miletus Work, Blue-White (Baba Nakkaş, Style of the Masters, Tuğrakeş), Saz Yolu, Damascus Work

and Rhodes Work. The styles mentioned are İznik style and are not specific to Kütahya tiles. 18th century Kütahya tiles, on the other hand, are composed of human and animal figures and plant motifs and left their mark on the era in terms of style with their originality (Atay, 2007:50). In Kütahya, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, old İznik tile motifs were returned. Kütahya tile making in the Republican period witnessed many technical and technological developments. A great development in the ceramics and tile sector in Kütahya during the Republican period showed itself in the field of education (Gülaçtı, 2011).



Figure 1: Blue-White, Kütahya, 16th century. (Carswell,1991:65)



Figure 2: Wall tiles with plant motifs,
Early 20th century.(Atay, 2007:40)



Figure 3: First half of the 20th century, vase.
(Gök, 2015:20)

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This research was prepared by selecting three examples that stand out with their different characteristics/tendencies among Kütahya-based contemporary ceramic artists. The selected artists are; Kütahya native Erkan Ünal, Kütahya Dumlupınar University Fine Arts

Faculty ceramics and glass department head Prof. Nureddin Gülaçtı and artists Ertuğrul Güngör & Faruk Ertekin from Kütahya, who continue their artistic lives as a duo.

Erkan Ünal

Erkan Ünal (b. 1981) was born in Kütahya. He studied in a different field at Kütahya Dumlupınar University. He started his ceramic works as a personal interest. The artist, who has been interested in ceramic art since 1998, has been working with his own special techniques (URL-1). Ünal applied the animal figures he produced from ceramic clay onto vases and plates, obtaining a three-dimensional visual, and gained a unique place in the field of tiles and ceramics. He prefers to use ceramic clay in his works. However, Kütahya's tile decoration always takes its place in the background (Figure 4,5,6,7).



Figure 4: Erkan Ünal (URL-2)



Figure 5: Erkan Ünal(URL-3)



Figure 6: Erkan Ünal(URL-4)



Figure 7: Erkan Ünal (URL-5)

Nureddin Gülaçtı

Nureddin Gülaçtı (b.1959) is a Professor at Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Ceramics and Glass. The artist, who has a 2011 art proficiency thesis titled “Ceramic-tile production and status determination in contemporary Kütahya”, also has articles on Kütahya tiles and ceramic art. In addition to making academic contributions to Kütahya tiles and ceramic art, Gülaçtı also draws attention with his original works interpreted in the context of contemporary design understanding (Figure 8,9,10).



Figure 8: Nureddin Gülaçtı
(Gülaçtı,2011:317)



Figure 9: Nureddin Gülaçtı
(Gülaçtı,2011:315)



Figure 10: Nureddin Gülaçtı
(Gülaçtı,2011:310)

Ertuğrul Güngör & Faruk Ertekin

Both Ertuğrul Güngör and Faruk Ertekin (b.1994) who produce their works together were born in Kütahya and graduated from Kütahya Fine Arts High School Painting Department. Ertuğrul Güngör completed his undergraduate education in Akdeniz University Fine Arts Faculty Ceramics Department and Faruk Ertekin completed his undergraduate education in Akdeniz University Fine Arts Faculty Graphics Department.

Both artists grew up in Kütahya, a city renowned for its rich cultural heritage and long-standing ceramic traditions. Drawing deeply from this heritage, they use ceramics to explore themes of identity, heritage, culture, memory, belonging and transformation. At the core of their practice is the profound use of ceramics for emotional and cultural expression, blending traditional motifs with contemporary figures to create works that resonate through time, honouring both the past and the present (Laudel,2025) (Figure 11,12).

Güngör and Ertekin are in search of a new language of expression by using contemporary design elements. In their works, the artists work with underglaze and overglaze painting techniques on the surfaces of two or three-dimensional forms they produce from tiles and ceramics. While their works interact with traditional art motifs, they establish a mental dialogue with contemporary figures (URL-6) In their works, they reinterpret traditional Kütahya tile motifs, Ottoman aesthetics, Christian iconography and mythological narratives. Inspired by figurative depictions and icons prepared by Armenian craftsmen who once lived in Kütahya, they combine their works with recurring motifs (Laudel,2025).

Merve Ertütüncü, in her interview with Güngör and Ertekin published in the SanatAtak web newspaper in 2021, states that the artists definitely have a perspective brought by living in Kütahya and that with this perspective, they want to make art based on our own traditions and present a contemporary approach (Ertütüncü,2021).



Figure 11: Ertuğrul Güngör & Faruk Ertekin, Echoes of the orient, 2024 (URL-7)



Figure 12:Ertuğrul Güngör & Faruk Ertekin, Piss on Fire, wall vase, 2025 (Laudel,2025)

CONCLUSION

Today, many of the workshops in Kütahya continue their traditional production. Developments in the field of high school, undergraduate and graduate education in ceramics and tiles during the Republic of Turkey period, and schools opened in Kütahya contribute to this region. Academicians such as Nureddin Gülaçtı who research Kütahya ceramics and tiles and contribute with new and original suggestions are emerging. In addition, an artist such as Erkan Ünal, who draws his inspiration from the traditional art of the city he lives in and seeks a new language of expression with his third-dimensional works, is also growing up in this environment. On the other hand, young artists from Kütahya, such as the duo Ertuğrul Güngör & Faruk Ertekin, who always create the same work together, come with a brand new contemporary breath with their works that synthesize the past and the future, tradition and the present, and the inspiration of the culture they grew up in.

Contemporary ceramic artists/masters who do not break the cultural bond of the past continue to grow in Kütahya.

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