

## THE RESTORATION OF A CORNER STOVE TILE

**Abstract:** This paper succinctly presents the manner in which a series of potsherds stored in the warehouses of the National Museum of Transylvanian History from Cluj-Napoca were processed and in which an artifact that belongs to the ensemble of a tile stove undergoing restoration was reconstituted.

**Keywords:** restoration, tile stove, heritage, stove tiles.

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The warehouses of the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca accommodate numerous important artifacts, some of them still waiting to be valorized. Among them, there is a stove with a canopy made up of tiles decorated with plant and geometric motifs. The original ensemble appears to have contained 56 tiles,<sup>2</sup> including 20 square tiles and 20 corner tiles arranged on five overlapped registers and a cornice made of 8 tiles with a semicircular profile, on top of which there were placed another 8 ornamental tiles, forming the canopy. The glazed stove with a white background has a blue-coloured relief decoration, the motifs on one tile being reiterated on each side of the stove; the decoration of the corner tiles appears in identical form on all the four edges of the stove, harmoniously combined with the motifs on the other tiles. In this case, the tiles, the decorated ceramic plates covering the stoves are made of a fine, glazed ceramic, with a white background, adorned with fine decorative motifs of cobalt blue, compact and well burnt. The colour palette, with mineral glaze made from pewter and cobalt, and the fine drawing design give a touch of elegance to the ensemble of the stove, with a painstaking decoration by painting.

Created for the utilitarian purposes, in the Germanic space sometime in the 13th century, tile stoves gradually spread throughout Europe, replacing the older heating systems (fire rings, fireplaces), being preferred due to their increased efficiency: tile stoves could heat space for longer periods of time thanks to the heat that was stored and radiated by the ceramic tiles. While the first shapes were more primitive - a clay body with a small number of built-in stove tiles - in time these stoves were to acquire, in addition to their utilitarian, aesthetic values, particularly in the second half of the 14th century, with the advent of tiles with figurative decorations, which used a varied ornamental repertoire. Stove tiles gradually evolved from simple utilitarian objects toward increasingly sophisticated pieces, some stoves becoming genuine works of art

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<sup>1</sup> Museum curator, PhD, National Museum of Transylvanian History, Cluj-Napoca, email bonta.claudia@mmit.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Tiles are ceramic plates used in building ovens and stoves.

meant to embellish the home.<sup>3</sup> During the 16th century there appeared a kind of stove whose entire surface of the walls was covered with ornaments that were reiterated indefinitely, creating a true textile decoration: the so-called wallpaper tiles, with ornamental motifs taken from Italian fabrics. The 16th century marked the appearance of faience stoves made of clay tiles on a white background with painted ornamental motifs, which replaced the relief decoration.<sup>4</sup> From a chromatic point of view, especially from the 17th century on, under the influence of Haban ceramics,<sup>5</sup> the refinement conferred by cobalt blue came to prevail.<sup>6</sup> During the 18th century, tile production experienced unprecedented development in Transylvania, through the emergence of new local craft centres at Drăușeni, Saschiz, Moșna, Agnita, Huedin, Almașul Mare, Aiud, Turda, Cușmed, Târgu Secuiesc, Mădăraș, Corund, Ghindari etc.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Paraschiva Victoria Batariuc, *Cahle din Moldova medievală (Secolele XIV-XVII)*, Suceava, Ed. Istros, 1999, pp. 34-37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Habans were believers who were part of the religious grouping of the Anabaptists, which appeared in Zurich, Switzerland. Because of being religiously persecuted, they took refuge in Moravia, Austria, Bohemia and other areas of Eastern Europe. Following the events during the 30-Year War in which the Transylvanian Prince Gabriel Bethlen had also become involved on the side of the Protestant Union, the Haban communities were severely affected, their members being forced to leave the territory of the Moravia and to head for Hungary and Transylvania, some groups also settling in Transylvania in 1621, where their presence was reported sporadically ever since the 16th century. As they benefited from the fame of excellent craftsmen, Prince Gabriel Bethlen granted them economic and religious privileges and settled them on his estate in Vințul de Jos. The groups arrived successively in 1622, 1623, 1629, 1635, 1649, during the reigns of Gabriel Bethlen, George I Rákóczy and George II Rákóczy. The Habans settled at Vințul de Jos, Micești, Gilău, Iernut, Făgăraș, etc. Their name is derived, apparently, from the term *Haushaben*, which referred to the common household of the Habans (Habans were known under several names, such as *Hutterite Anabaptists* - after the name of one of their leaders, Jakob Huter. In documents and sources written in Latin or Hungarian they are mentioned as *fratres moravici, anabaptistae, morva testvérek, újkeresztények*). Followers of radical Reformism, the leading principle of the Habans was to achieve the “Christian ideal” state, to establish social equality, to have shared property over goods. They practised consenting baptism among adults, rejecting infant baptism. Skilled craftsmen, with products manufactured at a high technical level, Anabaptist settlers were weavers, ropemakers, blacksmiths, locksmiths, knifsmiths, furriers, tanners, skinnners, hatters, hatters, coopers, potters, masons, builders, etc. Haban pottery was highly acclaimed in its time, its long-lasting reputation being ensured by its high-quality products. In the second half of the 17th century, Counter-reformation offensive affected the Habans too. Their forced Catholicization began in the second half of the 18th century, under the reign of Maria Theresa, which led either to the emigration of the Habans or to their forced conversion, bringing about the dissolution of the Haban colonies in Transylvania, see Magdalena Bunta, Katona Imre, “Cronica habană de la Cluj,” in *Acta Mvsei Napocensis*, XV, Cluj-Napoca, 1978, pp. 315-330; Magdalena Bunta, “Habani în Transilvania,” in *Acta Mvsei Napocensis*, VII, Cluj, 1970, pp. 201-225; Ligia Fulga, Lia Maria Voicu, *Ceramica de tradiție habană. Istorie, mentalități și relații comerciale în sec. al XVIII-lea*, Brașov, Transilvania Expres, 2013, pp. 19-30; William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996; Françoise Fischer-Naas, “Les Assemblées anabaptistes-mennonites de la Haute Vallée de la Bruche (1708-1870),” in *Revue d'Alsace*, 137/2011, pp. 461-472.

<sup>6</sup> Magdalena Bunta, “Faianța habană din Transilvania,” in *Acta Mvsei Napocensis*, VIII, Cluj, 1971, pp. 219-236.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolae Bucur, “Colecțiile de cahle din muzeele harghitene,” în *Angustia*, 14/2010, Sfântu Gheorghe, Ed. Angustia, pp. 451-466.

The stove captured in a reconstitution process consists of tiles<sup>8</sup> decorated with a few ornamental motifs that are repeated obsessively, on the basis of a well-established decorative scheme, using mostly plant decorations. We may notice the precise execution of the ornamental ensemble of the stove, the outstanding quality and the elaborate shapes of the decorative repertoire subsumed to an ingenious aesthetic theme, composed for this interior decoration element. The Baroque-inspired format and the color scheme confirm the Haban influence.<sup>9</sup> The products made by the Haban craftsmen in Vinț are mentioned in documents from the 16th century on, in reference to the quadrangular (or cylindrical) shape of the stove, with a castellated cornice, called frilled (*csipkézett*) in the documents, stoves with white glaze, after the “German way,”<sup>10</sup> with specific floral decorations.<sup>11</sup> The most numerous Haban tiles were decorated with geometrical and plant motifs and, characteristically, they used mainly two colours of glaze: pewter white and cobalt blue,<sup>12</sup> both of which are discernible in the present case.

The tiles that make up this stove have a white background with a decoration achieved by painting with cobalt blue pigment, covered in a colourless transparent glaze. The ornaments feature a predominantly vegetal decoration (leaves, flowers, plant stalks), having tulip flowers in the corners of each façade tile and a central flower that starts from a stylized vase and has a stem branched into two, with two chord-like elements symmetrically arranged on the branches, one either side of the stem. The corner tile consists of three unequal sides, a square and a rectangle connected by the concave contact surface. It also illustrates a preference for tiles with geometric and plant ornaments. Having a simple linear border decorated in relief with cobalt-blue plant motifs, the corner tile has the contact surface in the shape of an oblong, deepened hexagon, presenting a geometric decoration with lobe around the edges, a border of full semicircles. The contact side of the corner tile has been treated as a *cavetto* onto which the painted decoration was applied: the four tulip flowers opening in pairs, one towards the other, two on the sides, in the two lateral oblique spaces and two positioned *adossé* in the centre of the space, outlining the shape of an elegant bow, with the tile edges accentuated by the lobed geometric decoration. The field of the tile is clearly organized into two main registers with the aid of a horizontal border that divides the area into two main registers: a higher one, which is white, undecorated, except for the hexagon, and a lower one, charged with the blue ornament, a series of combinations of vegetal motifs and geometrical elements: fragments of circle arcs associated with sinuous plant stalks that trace semicircular spaces circumscribing stylized flowers. The central flower, a tulip in bloom, appears framed by vegetal garlands, a cobweb of arched stalks stylized leaves. A series of

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<sup>8</sup> These tiles have a broad dating range in the inventory registers, suggesting that they were produced in the 18th-19th centuries.

<sup>9</sup> Long admired, the products of the Haban workshops were imitated by the local workshops, the influence of Haban earthenware being perpetuated until late in history.

<sup>10</sup> Paraschiva Victoria Batariuc, *Cahle...*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Magdalena Bunta, *Faianța habană...*, pp. 219-236.

<sup>12</sup> Paraschiva Victoria Batariuc, *Cahle...*, p. 43.

embossed buttons borders the stalk ending on the corners with two small tulip buds with round lobes. From a decorative point of view, the short side of the tile corresponds to the upper register on the broader side: a white, undecorated space, which sets the decoration of the hexagon into relief. The strongly stylized image is added to the chord-like and floral elements that ingeniously charge the other ornamental ceramic tiles comprising the stove. The material used for the tile undergoing the restoration process is clay, white engobe (kaolin) and the technique is classical: kneading, manual moulding and pressing of the clay into the pattern, then slow-drying, engobing, decorating by brush painting, glazing and, finally, oxidizing burning in the oven.

After an attempt to restore the ensemble of the stove (**Fig. 1**) we tried to recover the fragmented tiles. Thus, the ceramic fragments preserved in the warehouses underwent restoration operations. From the dozens of potsherds, 24 fragments were selected in terms of their shape, texture and decoration, these fragments outlining the skeleton of a corner tile (**Fig. 2**). First there was performed a mechanical wet cleaning which removed the deposits of clogged dirt, followed by the free drying of the fragments at room temperature for 70 hours. As the priority was the good conservation of the ceramic fragments, the next step was to immediately reinforce them by impregnation in a diluted solution 1/5 nitro lacquer. The next stage consisted in reconstituting the tile by gluing together the ceramic fragments by means of a transparent, plasticizer-free adhesive, of the white glue type. This step of the restoration process was performed on the basis of the decoration, shape and thickness of the ceramic fragments. The gluing operations took several days, using as support a box filled with fine sand in which the assembled fragments were laid for reinforcing the glued joints (**Fig. 3**).

Restoring the corner tile was carried out using the method of the clay negative, secured by light pressure, over which good-quality plaster was poured from the outside, shaped with the help of a spatula to remake the tile. The next stage of the restoration resided in the chromatic integration of the restored potsherds and in reconstituting the original appearance of the tile. This was accomplished by fine painting with white and, respectively, cobalt blue oil pigments, respecting the original decoration of the tile.

The last operation consisted in the final conservation of the tile: impregnation by brushing with a diluted solution 1/5 nitro lacquer. The dimensions of the tile after restoration are  $L = 22$  cm;  $l = 22.2$  cm;  $H = 10.2$  cm;  $G = 3.2$  cm (**Fig. 4**).

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Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.