Tile Inspirations
by Robin Giants

I introduce my high-school students to the art of ceramics during the early part of their visual arts foundation course. Once I felt the students had developed the skills and patience for a long-term, detailed, ceramic-arts assignment, the class embarked on a tile relief project, wherein students considered the shape, surface, texture and eventually the white wash of color that would complete the tiles.

The objective was to show how their recent field trip to the LongHouse Reserve, an art and sculpture garden on the East End of Long Island, in the nearby town of East Hampton, N.Y., had inspired them.

The LongHouse Reserve has an internationally recognized “Art in the Gardens” program, assembled with a collection of more than 60 contemporary sculptures. Throughout the reserve, permanent works are displayed, along with those on seasonal loan from artists, collectors and dealers.

The LongHouse was founded by Jack Lenore Larson, an internationally known textile designer, author, collector and one of the world’s foremost advocates of traditional and contemporary crafts. The art is very exciting, much of it being on a large scale. There is even an original Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome on the grounds to walk in and around.

The garden and works at the Reserve became the students’ muse. How they handled the assignment using the trip and what they experienced to inspire their tiles was up to them.

CREATING OUR TILES

Students began by developing a theme based on examples of clay work they saw during their visit to LongHouse. They started with three thumbnail sketches, then chose one to use as a final template for their tile. The design was to include a foreground, middle ground and background to show depth.

I wanted the students we would be taking this project to a level of detail they had not experienced in previous clay projects. I prepared them to maintain patience and continue working until I saw the level of detail required to complete the project according to my directives.

Final drawings were transferred onto clay slabs, which we had rolled out during the previous class and saved in wrapped plastic on wooden boards to prevent drying out. Templates were laid onto the clay, and a craft knife was cautiously used to cut the outside edge.

We then used pin tools to poke tiny holes along the lines of the designs on paper and into the clay slabs below.

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I demonstrate making eyes by carving into the clay or rolling small balls of clay and making impressions in them with clay tools. These eyes are attached using slip also.

As students made their slab pots, many of them also used pulled pieces of clay to make legs, feet, tongues and other body parts for their animals. These pulled pieces were in addition to the slabs they had already used.

When the pots had been successfully completed and air-dried, we fired them for the first time. When they were removed from the kiln, the students got to pick from an assortment of lead-free glazes to glaze their animal pots. I wanted them to get to make their animal pots as colorful as possible to keep them whimsical.

When the kiln was opened for the second time, the students were really excited by the wonderful animal pots they had created. One of my third graders said, “Wow, Mrs. Skop, you’re a genius!” If only that were true.

Karen Skophammer is an art instructor for Manson Northwest Webster School in Barnum and Manson, Iowa.

DRIED AND FIRED The tiles are slowly dried on boards under loosely draped plastic, and then unwrapped to air dry. Fast drying creates warping, so this is important. When work reaches the greenware state—where it is extremely fragile—it is carefully transferred and loaded into the ceramic kiln and fired to Cone 06.

Once the firing is complete, we removed our work from the kiln and applied a thin, diluted wash of paint to stain it in earth tones.

We assembled the final collaboration piece on a strong piece of plywood that had been cut to fit the number of tiles completed by the class, sanded and painted. A strong wall-hanging system, such as a Z hanger, will ensure this piece stays securely to a wall.

In the end, the students’ patience and attention to detail paid off in the form of recognition from the Long-House. They won the Best in Show award at the annual Student Art Competition held on location, and the work was a featured cover piece of the reception and opening event’s printed program.

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