



HEIRLOOMS OF THE FUTURE

FRANCES PRIEST

Dominique Corlett speaks to the ceramic artist about the language of pattern, and tiles as public art

Stars, chevrons, stripes, interlocking circles, spirals, fish scales and herringbone: the patterns that adorn Frances Priest's colourful ceramics, which are held in numerous collections (including the V&A, the National Museum of Scotland, and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), are a glossary of the language of ornamentation. And while the pieces she makes – sculptural

bowls and vases, as well as tiles – look strikingly contemporary with their colliding patchworks of patterns and bright colourways, the motifs also call to mind decorations seen on Art Deco tiled fire surrounds, or even Iznik pottery from 16th-century Turkey.

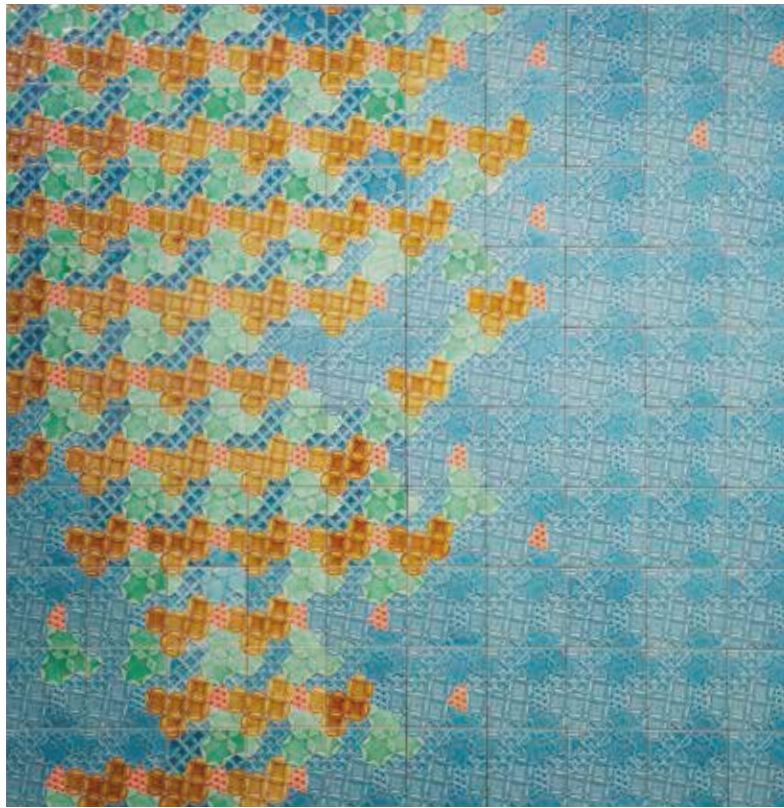
The familiarity of this decorative language is no coincidence. A self-confessed 'pattern obsessive,' Frances describes her work as 'utilising the narratives and

cultural histories of ornamental motif.' This is a subject that has fascinated her since childhood when she was given a copy of the influential Victorian pattern book, *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, first published in 1856. This important reference work meticulously recorded decorative motifs from around the globe and not only had a huge impact on Victorian design, but is still widely used today. ▶



LEFT A gathering bowl inspired by North Stradbroke Island in Australia, made for the client's parents, who had lived on the island and loved its seascapes.

ABOVE Three mini gathering bowls.



ABOVE A wall of Byzantine tiles at the Future Heritage exhibition in October 2022. This collection was inspired by the Byzantine pages of *The Grammar of Ornament*, a Victorian pattern book from 1856. **BELOW** Byzantine tile in limited-edition colourway.

To Frances, it was also 'a beautiful folio of gorgeous lithographic printed pages of pattern that I just fell in love with.'

So influential has *The Grammar of Ornament* been on Frances that it set the course for the work she has made over her 25-year career, and continues to be a primary source of inspiration: her Byzantine collection for Future Heritage, 2022, at Chelsea Harbour was made as a response to the Byzantine pages in the book. 'My pieces are always made in response to something; that's always the starting point,' she says. 'I've always been interested in the idea of ornament evolving over time, in the hands of different makers, through different processes and different materials.'

Frances grew up in West Yorkshire and discovered clay during an art foundation year at Dewsbury College, where she was taught by ceramicist David

Roberts. She moved to Edinburgh, (where she still lives) for a degree, followed by a post-graduate diploma in ceramics at Edinburgh College of Art, graduating in 1999. By 2005, things were difficult in ceramics; their relevance was being questioned and teaching departments were closing. But just as Frances was doubting her chosen path and about to lose her teaching job, fate intervened and she was invited to Japan to take part in a Crafts Council exhibition.

In Japan, Frances discovered a culture where making and the decorative arts were revered, and ceramics in particular were considered one of the highest art forms, all of which renewed her hope and confidence. A year as 'artist in residence' at a school in Thailand followed, after which she travelled across Asia, soaking up the cultural importance of ceramics, and the respect with which they were treated.

Her time away allowed Frances to consider pattern in relation to place, and to think about how ceramics are used beyond their intended purpose: 'the way they accumulate meaning over time and have a life beyond the person who makes them.' This in turn led her to think about ornament as a very democratic art form. 'There was a massive shift in my thinking,' she says, 'away from objects on plinths in galleries and towards how ceramics can feed out into the world.' All of which is evident in the projects Frances undertakes in the public realm, particularly her work with Craven Dunnill Jackfield, a heritage tile company based in Ironbridge.

Frances first collaborated with the company on a project for the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, in which she created a new, tiled corridor in response to the ornately tiled Victorian stairwells in the older part of the building. Her tiles were produced in multiples by Craven Dunnill Jackfield, with Frances working closely with their glaze specialists throughout the process. 'The tiles felt like an obvious move because of my interest in Victorian decorative arts, and because that period was such a high point for tiles,' Frances says. Following this collaboration, she gained a scholarship, via the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust, to spend 10 months on the factory floor learning about the company's processes for making moulded, glazed wall tiles and



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RIGHT The tiled corridor at Royal Edinburgh Hospital was Frances's first collaboration with tile manufacturer, Craven Dunnill Jackfield, and is something she is particularly proud of. It was inspired by original tiled stairwells in a Victorian part of the hospital. **BELOW** A selection of Byzantine vase forms.



encaustic floor tiles – something they have done for 150 years.

'It made me realise there wasn't such a big gap between what I was doing in the studio and what was happening in the factory,' she says. 'Everything is still being made by hand: there's real craftsmanship at the heart of what they do.'

While she continues to produce her own studio pieces, working with Craven Dunnill Jackfield on bespoke tile designs has become an increasingly important part of her work and is something that Frances is keen to develop. She would love to make an encaustic tile floor for someone, she says.

The tiles also seem to have seeped into her studio work, the latest of which consists of flat, decorated clay panels. And despite all the pieces she

has in museum collections, it is the tiled corridor in Edinburgh that means the most to her: 'I feel it brought together a lot of my interests, and the fact that it's in a healthcare setting means that anybody can see it, and I think that's really wonderful.'

So much ornamentation has been erased from our built environment, she says, noting that buildings lack joy and have become very spare, which is why she is so proud of the hospital corridor. 'The number of people I encounter who say, "Oh, you made that, I love that, I see it when I visit my friend," or "I work there and I love walking through that space" – that really matters to me. The fact that I'm now starting to get more work in that area is really exciting.'

WHERE TO BUY

Prices start at £390 for a mini gathering bowl. Contact Frances through her website to be put on her mailing list. Cavaliero Finn (cavalierofinn.com) and &Gallery (andgallery.co.uk) stock her larger work, starting at £1,980.

