The Preservation of the Original Tiles in the New York City Subway System

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Background of the NYC Subway

• Created in 1904
• Originally three separate companies: BMT (1904), IRT (1904), IND (1932)

Eventually consolidated into the MTA in 1965.
The Original Tiles of the New York Subway

• George C. Heins and Christopher LaFarge (1901-1907)
  – Designed most of the early ceramic work in the subway system.
  – Used bas relief designs and decorative motifs along the ceilings.
  – The Greubly Faience Company built many of the numerical ceramic tiles in the NYC subway as well.
  – Tiles were decorative and easy to clean.

• Squire Vickers (1906-1942)
  – Tile work has less bas relief and more flat mosaic patterns.
  – Easier to clean flat tile and less expensive to produce.
The Tiles of the NYC Subway

- American Encaustic Tiling Company is a company that competed for the business of tiling the NYC Subway System
  - Based in Zanesville, Ohio
  - Founded in 1875
  - Although not ultimately picked to make the tiles, examples of their tiling can still be seen and is preserved in certain subway stations
Why Tiles?

- Subway stations are constantly being renovated.
- Throughout the 20th Century, the MTA renovated deteriorating stations by using bricks instead of tiles.
- As the economy improved, however, many of the stations were restored to their old Gilded Age grandeur.
- Given the fickle nature of the economy, train stations may once again be covered in colored bricks instead of ceramic tiles and these pictures will exist as a reminder of what once was.
Why Tiles?

• I have been obsessed with the New York City subway for as long as I can remember. My dad and I would go on “subway adventures” to the end of random subway lines. We would stop by at the local deli at the last stop to hold me over for the subway ride home. During these escapades, the tiles of the stations intrigued me the most. I always looked forward to discovering the next design of the mosaics at the following station. Over the years, I have noticed that many stations are being renovated and changed. In order to preserve the tiles that I have fascinated me since I could walk, I decided to photograph them for all to see.
116\textsuperscript{th} Street Station Columbia University

• The 116\textsuperscript{th} Street Station at Columbia University never got the total facelift that many other stations got in the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century.

• If you look carefully enough, you can find the alma mater in a ceramic tile.

• The station was placed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks on Sept 17, 2004.
96th Street Station

• Underwent a huge renovation just a few years ago.
• Only a small part of the station still contains the original tiles.
• Unfortunately, the old tiles are at the very edge of the platform and are not visible to the average commuter.
86th Street Station

• In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 86th St. station on the 1 train fell into disrepair.
• To maintain some of the old station, old tiles were kept at the 86th street entrance and exit while the rest was covered in the tan and pink tiles below.
• To further spruce up the station, mosaics were added in 1998.
86th Street Station
Examples of Mosaics
79th Street Station

- The timeline of the renovation is very similar to that of the 86th street station.
- The station was renovated in the early 1980s and it has the same tile format as the 86th Street station.
- It does not however, have mosaics. I also noticed that the old tiles are in some disrepair as well.
72\textsuperscript{nd} Street Station

- Preservation of the tiles can often be obscured by structural supports which help maintain the walls of the subway system.
66th Street
Lincoln Center Station

- The station was renovated in 2004.
- It still bares traces of its old self.
- Some of the mosaics include an “LC” insignia while some do not.

The station was built before Lincoln Center was built and renovated after the construction of Lincoln Center.
Columbus Circle 59th Street Station

Most of the remaining ceramic tiles are protected by landmark designation. The design that exists used to line the entire station. The station also contains an exhibit of old tiles made by The American Encaustic Company on the uptown platform of the 1 train.
Astor Place Station

- The station fell into disrepair during the early 1980s and was renovated in 1986 to its old grandeur.
- It has a landmark designation which preserves the station’s tiles. There is even a K-Mart with access to the station now.
BEAVER DECORATIONS ARE SEEN THROUGHOUT THE ASTOR SUBWAY STATION. BEAVER PELTS HELPED MAKE JOHN ASTOR WEALTHY.
Bleecker Street Station

• The Bleecker Station has some ceramic tiles made by the Greuby Faience Company that are landmarked.
• The station was renovated about a year ago. The station now connects with the B,M,D,F trains.
The Fulton Street Station caught my attention more than most stations.

The station is currently undergoing a massive renovation that is numbering in the 100s of millions of dollars.

During this renovation, many lost parts of the station were restored to their old grandeur.

The 4,5 station is still being restored and many of the ceramics need repairing.

The boat in the tile is a steamboat from Robert Fulton’s steamboat company.
Fulton Street Station Corridor
Wall Street Station

• The Wall Street station is one of the first subway stations.
• Many of the old station’s tiles are intact now due to renovations in the early 2000s.
• During the 1970s, the station was covered in blue bricks.
• The blue bricks were removed and tiles restored.
• Like many other stations, the ceramic tiles have landmark status.
• On the ceramic tile is the old wall that existed when the Dutch settled down in what was known as New Amsterdam.
DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESTORED DECORATIVE TILE CAN BE SEEN IN THE WALL STREET STATION.
The Ceilings of Stations

• While I was taking the pictures of the tiles, I noticed that certain parts of the stations had ornate moldings on the ceilings.

• They were mainly centered around areas where the restored ceramic tiles of the station were located.
The Efforts to Maintain Old Tiles

• The MTA over the past few years has preserved old tiles through various means.

• All of them are on public display for people to see at all times.

• The 14th Street Union Square Station has many examples of preserved tiles.
The Red Outline displays some of the restored tiles at the Union Square Station.
BROADWAY LINE
AND STREET
EXIT TO STREET
The Borough Hall Station was the first subway station in Brooklyn built in 1908.

Flat tile of the name plate with the terra cotta bas relief design above it.

Square Vickers designed many of the tiles in this station.

Even in early times, it was cheaper to make flat tiles and they were easier to clean than the bas relief tiles.
Borough Hall
Tiles restored and some still unrestored
Bibliography


• Stookey, Lee “Subway Ceramics” A History and Iconography 1994 ( slide 3) info
