

The Mosaic Tiles of Yamauchi Itsuzō (1908–1992)

These are mosaic tile prototypes created by Yamauchi Itsuzō, a ceramicist who is considered by many to be the inventor of glazed porcelain mosaic tiles in Japan.

Born in nearby Kasahara, Yamauchi moved to Kyoto at the age of fifteen, where he studied various aspects of ceramics and glazing at the Kyoto City Ceramic Research Institute. In 1929, Yamauchi returned to his hometown and set up his own tile factory. At first, he predominantly made large decorative tiles. However, these complex, three-dimensional pieces were difficult and time-consuming to create. They required careful molding and sometimes broke during firing. In response to these difficulties, Yamauchi was inspired to make smaller, simpler tiles that would be easy to produce in uniform batches and less prone to breakage. Yamauchi finalized his method for mass-producing mosaic tiles in 1935.

The mosaic tiles sold well, particularly in the reconstruction period following World War II. Yamauchi's success inspired other ceramicists in Kasahara to switch to producing mosaic tiles themselves. Though potters are typically protective of their trade secrets, Yamauchi shared information freely, and he spurred a revolution in production methods that helped to establish Kasahara as a vital tile production center in the postwar years.

The larger prototypes on the left are slip-cast stoneware, made by filling a mold with a liquid clay called "slip." The smaller ones on the right are dry-pressed porcelain, which is made by mixing powdered clay with a binder, such as silicate or feldspar, and pressing it into a mold.