

## "The Tasman Tiles"

By Anneke Borren, Ceramist, June 2012

Through May and June 2012, I was living on the water in the middle of Golden Bay, in the year 1642, on board the Dutch sailing ship de Zeehaen - this, looking through the eyes of a Delft blue ceramic tile. Actually, not just one, but 500 of them.

Just before my major neck surgery operation in March 2010, I was commissioned by The Dutch Connection Museum Trust in Auckland, to reproduce as a major tile mural, a drawing that is attributed to Isaac Gilsemans who was on board of Abel Tasman's ships when they arrived in Golden Bay, west of Nelson.

Golden Bay was originally named Murderer's Bay by Tasman after a 24 hour incident with local Maori, in which he lost four sailors and the Maori lost at least one warrior. Gilsemans' drawing recorded this event.

My commission required the drawing to be translated into a 3x5 metre Delft Blue Tile Tableau to be installed in the planned new Dutch museum centre in Foxton, Horowhenua.

In 2011, I made four maquettes of this drawing, each comprising 24 tiles. One was for the Dutch Connection for fundraising purposes, one for the current Dutch Ambassador, one for Waiariki Polytech in Rotorua, and one for myself. In March this year I finally signed the contract, with a "my own artistic interpretation" clause which is necessary when "translating" history into an artwork.

I divided a copy of the original drawing into segments, four down and seven across and had photocopy enlargements made. The logistics were interesting, in my small studio, but I managed to fit four tables in, each holding sections of 16 tiles. My white glaze is fairly high-firing, between 1200 and 1250 degrees C, while the bisqued tiles were of white earthenware, so I fired them over 100C above their intended firing range, to be able to get a lovely blue on sparkling white. This meant their horizontal stacking in my electric kiln became of paramount importance. Howard Williams gave me his special tile-firing stacks, without which I could not have done it at all.

I brush decorated with a mixture of oxides on top of the unfired glaze (overglaze decoration) - no room for mistakes as every bit of each brush stroke shows up! Copper oxide for green; cobalt oxide with bits of iron and chrome for a good blue; watered down versions of both for shading and a red stain for the Dutch flag.

My first attempt of 16 tiles for the background mountains was unsuccessful. I had used Japanese brushes and the fired result was "painterly" with lovely colours, but too "watercolour-ly" to be indicative of the original etched line. Mentally and emotionally I had to translate that etched line into a brush stroke that evoked a 1642 image. It had to be bold in its much larger size and confident, within the knowledge of the time and the understanding that the artist had never seen Maori before and was probably better trained in drawing topography than bodies. I changed to short-haired square brushes of several sizes.

The incident itself had to be examined and is still today, controversial. Had Tasman's sailors landed, perhaps in search of fresh water? Had they, unwittingly, broken a tapu? Perhaps they had ventured too near Maori food gardens? Were there Maori runners through the night warning other Maori, resulting in the large gathering of waka the next morning in the bay? What about the misunderstanding of Abel Tasman in response to the war-cry of the conch shell, trumpeting back? What about the firing of the ship's cannons and the hurried escape out of the bay, with the explanations of the incident as explained on the page of the original drawing?

I started again with the mountain range in the back and made my way through the blocks of tiles, getting totally immersed; square-eyed and focussed. The heads of the Maori depicted in the drawing seemed so

out of proportion, perhaps because when looking down on a waka from a tall ship, the perspective is skewed, so I asked my artist friend, Jean Dickinson to "normalise" the men's heads so I could brushwork them into the style of the whole tableau.

To demarcate the brush-lines I used a pointed steel tool to "sgraffito" the divisions of the lines, not noticeable from afar, but from close up making for nice detailing. In fact I did a lot of line scratching; wavy ones for beards, lines forming pulled back hair, lines distinguishing knees from legs, arms from paddles, etc. Also, whilst I could not change the positions of the waka warriors, I still had to take into consideration the eventual grouting lines between the tiles, trying not to cut through important details like necks, eyes and noses.

Following each firing, I laid the tiles all over the carpet in my house, but had no room big enough to see the complete whole, so had to carefully pack each section after examination, in order to lay out the next one. Only when the museum building in Foxton is completed and I'm helping the tiler to put it all together, will I be able to see the whole image together, in reality, instead of in my head.

The New Zealand Netherlands Foundation happened to ring while I was in the middle of all this, asking a survey question, "Are you an ACTIVE or PASSIVE Dutch person in this country?" Well - I am Dutch by birth, a nationalised NZ citizen by choice and a well integrated lover of Aotearoa for 50 years. But it was a pointed reminder of the duality of my translation of the "Tasman Tiles", figuratively, giving it my best shot both ways.