

Introduction

The set came in a small wooden box with some Chinese characters carved into the sliding lid. I'd assumed they had some connection to Mah-Jong but recently discovered it was a poem.

Inside I found a layer of tissue paper and, strangely, tiles covered in dust.

The advertisement in ebay just showed the box slightly opened, a few tiles displayed and – worryingly – a tile count below the normal 144, so it was with some apprehension that I examined the contents. The dust, I finally realised, was bone dust. The set had never been used.

An email exchange revealed that the sellers had never actually played the game. The set had belonged to an uncle who had worked for Cunard, a famous shipping company responsible for iconic ships like the *'Queen Mary'*, *'Queen Elizabeth'* and *'QE2'*. The old set had laid in their attic since the 1960s. He had probably bought it in China sometime during the 1920s or 1930s.

The tiles in modern sets are usually made from plastic, but this was made from traditional materials: bone, dove-tailed onto bamboo. It was probably one of many hundreds produced for the early 20th century Western market, a demand so great it required shiploads of cow bone imports from America to sustain it.

Two small bone dice – a large dot for the *'one'* – and a batch of tally sticks, also made from bone, completed the set. It's a fairly modest one compared with those that came housed in ornately carved boxes, but nevertheless it does show some of the craftsmanship of those early designers.



"Flowers in a shower in Kon Nam"

The Tile Designs

Seasons

Some of the more interesting designs are found on the Flower and Season tiles which, unlike their modern counterparts, do not actually show flowers or depict seasons, except elliptically.

One often comes across tiles that show occupations associated with each of the seasons.

Here's an example taken from the banner for my website: Mahjong-BritishRules.com.



The tiles actually have the colour of bleached bone but are tinted gold for effect

1. Spring is a fisherman, representing common sense and patience. His good management brings prosperity for all.
2. Summer is a woodcutter, who represents success through activity. His chopping of firewood relates to three of the elements of Chinese philosophy: fire, wood and metal – fire being the dominant one of vitality, ambition and industry.
3. Autumn is a farmer, who represents the physical, arduous labour involved in bringing in the harvest – showing the effort to get the job done gives rich rewards.
4. Winter is a scholar (namely Confucius) who represents a prudent, cultured mind turning toward literary or artistic work when little can usefully be achieved outdoors.

But my set contained unusual figures – Chinese warriors.



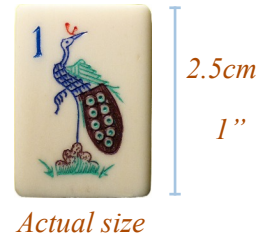
So far my researches have not produced an explanation for these designs.

The Chinese characters in the upper left hand corners are the same as those found in my banner tiles. They give the names of the four seasons and are painted red by convention

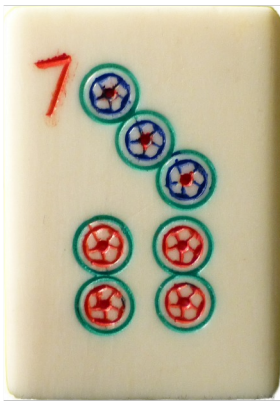
Finessing the Paintwork

The actual Mahjong tiles are quite small, just 2.5cm (1") high, so one can imagine those early 20th century craftsmen hunching over lenses and using delicate strokes with the finest of their brushes to achieve the results we can see.

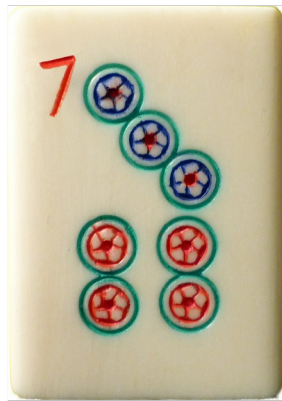
The pictures I wanted to create required a magnification which would expose some of the inevitable smudges and missed strokes. Although the paintwork survived the scrutiny amazingly well, when I examined it closely there were quite a number of places where corrections needed to be made.



These took some time, but the results better suited my purposes. Here are some examples of tile pictures before and after the editing...



7 Bamboos



1 Bamboos - Peacock



Red Dragon



East Wind



Flower - Rich Man



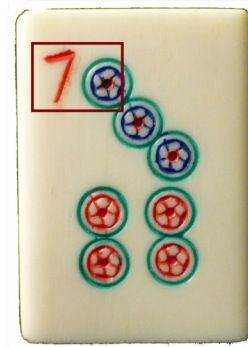
Warrior Season - Summer



The changes may not be immediately obvious at the magnification shown on the previous page. The artists were skillful, especially those who dealt with the Flower and Season tiles.

Here's some of the changes to sections of the tiles, shown at a higher level of magnification...

7 Circles tile



Before



After

Season tile



Before



After

Flower tile



Before



After

The Joker tile

The Joker tile presented more problems, partly because it would appear that the craftsman responsible did not show the same level of skill or care as those who had painted the Flower and Season tiles, but also because I didn't properly recognise the design at first and photographed it upside down!

It meant that, when I orientated it correctly, the shading was showing on the wrong side of the tile. I was able to deal with this by merging the edited tile image with that of the White Dragon, so that the resulting tile picture then showed a shading consistent with the other tiles...



After removing background



After editing



Merging with White Dragon



Resulting picture

Joker Tile



Flower tile – Rich Man



Warrior Season Tile – Summer

