



HER NATIVE ROOTS:

Native Tile and Ceramics

BY TERRY TSUJIOKA

With the matte-green, hexagonal relief tile came Native Tile founder Diana Mausser's career-defining moment.

IT WAS THE 1980s, AND SOFT colors of the Southwest and country-style decor were *in*. Straight out of UCLA with a degree in design, Diana Mausser, a Hermosa Beach, Calif., native, had landed at a South Bay-area tile company that was doing brisk business making pastel and flowered tiles. As an assistant glaze technician, she was formulating custom glazes and getting “really good at making many versions of ’80s-style peach, pink, mauve and grey.”

Then a customer arrived with his turn-of-the-century matte-green, leaf-patterned terra cotta tile, wanting to recreate it and restore a plaque depicting a man on a horse spearing a dragon. Diana was inspired. “It reminded me of the kind of textile work I’d done in college — in the style and colors I really liked.” Before her employers could turn the job down, Diana spoke up and convinced them, “I can make these — for sure.”

“That was my introduction to Batchelder tile,” she recalls, “and my first restoration job. It was also the moment I realized that if I was going to make tile for a living, this was the kind I wanted to make. In school, ceramics and textiles were the media I loved. And now I was certain that tiles would allow me to bring the two together. Using clay as the medium, I could create patterns and textures very textile-oriented — in rich, custom colors.”

Custom colors are Diana’s trademark today, gracing the 800 distinctive Craftsman, Spanish and Moorish tile designs she’s created since starting her own business in 1990. She launched Native Tile and Ceramics in a 500-square-foot rehabbed shed in a Marina Del Rey boatyard surrounded by boat builders who became a second family. She focused on handmade, labor-intensive tiles



rooted in the designs of her native state, like those she’d recreated and restored for that memorable client a decade earlier — the kind of work normally passed up by her one-time employer.

Inspired and Driven

With no financial help, she started out alone, tackling many small Batchelder and Craftsman restoration jobs to help the company sustain itself. With luck, she bought some of her first clay materials — including a decade’s worth of patina-producing copper carbonate — for a dollar from a local tile factory that was closing its doors. Her inner innovator found fulfillment in recreating colors and textures of old glazes and in developing her own Craftsman tile. In a refined technique that can be repeated consistently, she layers many colors to achieve a mottled look resembling the old tiles. “Most people who are really passionate about the Craftsman style are very sensitive to the smallest details,” she says, “and I have a lot of respect for their patience to build or restore a Craftsman home the right way, with that intense attention to detail. I try to make my tile with this sensibility in mind.”



It's a commitment that propelled her search for a new shop location in 1998, when the boatyard was closed. Her persistence rewarded, Native Tile settled into a converted 1940s bungalow in what was once a residential neighborhood of Torrance. Now an area zoned for industry, it is, Diana says, "a natural environment with a lot of space for our work, our cats and our vegetable garden. I wanted a studio where we all felt at home. I couldn't see us in some cold, dank warehouse-type space trying to get inspired."

One of the lines in the Native Tile collection was inspired by the stunning rug tiles at the recently restored 1930 Adamson House in Malibu, where Diana serves on the Board of Directors. Another new line goes with the trend toward simpler spaces. Rooted in the Craftsman style, the design incorporates her love for the ocean with influences in what she calls the "Modern Craftsman" homes, which feature traditional lines and natural materials — and open, bright interiors.

These new ideas represent the work of a close-knit team of 10, led by this spirited artisan who envisioned the kind of company where she always wanted to work. "I try to offer my crew the benefits I would want if I was a dedicated and loyal employee somewhere. My boyfriend calls my business a 'non-profit.' He's probably right, but I want to give everyone at Native Tile as good a quality of life as the business can afford. We all work together."

"I also learned very early on that I'm a really bad salesperson and feel uncomfortable talking about the price of my work. I realized I needed someone else to sell the tiles, and I could focus on the part I enjoyed: creating them. So I searched for the right tile showrooms to represent Native Tile. They've proven to be a great showcase for our tile to architects, designers and homeowners."

A Second Home

As Native Tile developed a following in the design and restoration industry, demand steadily grew. And after producing tiles on her own for three years, the artist-entrepreneur started hiring, including some family and friends. "Once I got to this point," she says, "I vowed to create an environment that was comfortable and respectful to the people putting their time and energy into the business."

Native Tile and Ceramics
Torrance, California
310 533-8684
nativetile.com

