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MAGAZINE

BEST HOME INSPECTION TOOLS

# OLD HOUSE JOURNAL

THE WORLD  
OF **TILE**  
creativity beyond big-box design

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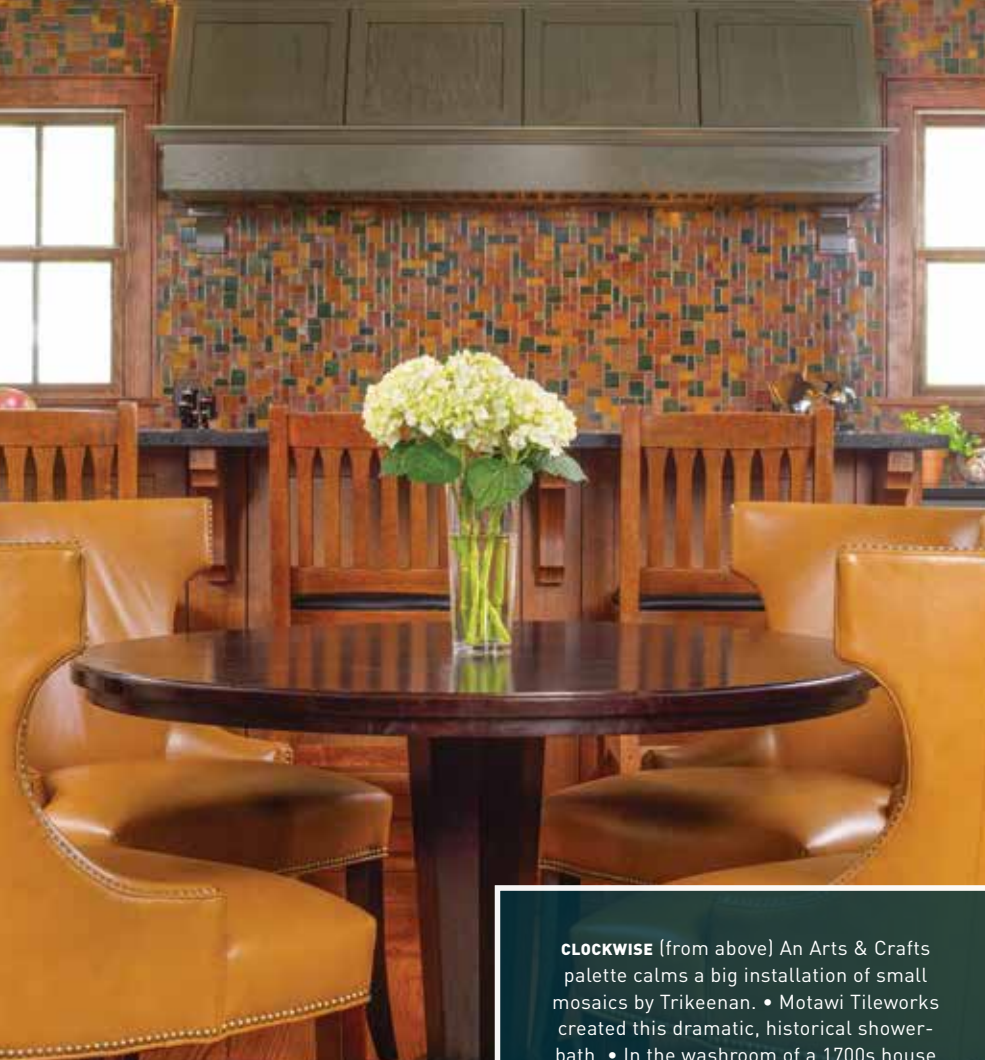
**LEFT** Hand-painted relief decos from Pratt & Larson accent a backsplash of plain field tiles in a new kitchen for a 1910 Colonial Revival house.

**BELOW** Drawing on the work of such earlier companies as Low, Trent, and American Encaustic, today's L'Esperance Tile Works specializes in bright, glossy glazes.

# designing *in* TILE

It's a big world out there! Production tile from the building store, art tile from small studios, decos and relief tiles, subway tile and mosaics, glazes matte and iridescent, encaustics and California revivals: whatever your choice might be, proportion, color and shade variance, and even the grout become part of the design decision. Here's an introduction to provide inspiration for unique installations. **BY PATRICIA POORE**





**CLOCKWISE** (from above) An Arts & Crafts palette calms a big installation of small mosaics by Trikeenan. • Motawi Tileworks created this dramatic, historical shower-bath. • In the washroom of a 1700s house in Warwickshire, Dutch and English tiles intermingle. • Tiles by Suzanne Crane: dogwood leaves were pressed into clay for an impression later used as the glazing template. • Period glaze colors on a mosaic floor by Motawi. • Geometrics form a star pattern around a modern encaustic tile by Original Style.





## THEN and now

With the revival of tile-making comes a revival of historically inspired installation design, too. To those familiar with the use of tile in the past, the rooms on this page may look like survivors from an earlier era. The white bathroom could be in an early-20th-century house; the purple-walled bath in a Jazz Age apartment; the fireplace surround in a California bungalow. Yet all were designed in the past 20 years. Indeed, those new to tile may find these installations bold and modern.

A dip into the archives reveals that tile was used in ways both utilitarian and decorative—in all periods. Flamboyant examples proliferated in the golden age of American tile-making, ca. 1910 until 1940—not all of it typically Arts & Crafts, as many assume. White mosaics and earthy amber and green tiles belong to this period, but so do brilliant Spanish-Moorish tiles and storybook Moravian tiles made by Mercer in Pennsylvania.

**LEFT** (top to bottom) Recalling California patterns of the 1920s-30s, this backsplash by Native Tile has crisp black trim tiles. • Lavender walls and a bold geometric floor say Jazz Age in this revival bathroom. • A fireplace installation in the style of Ernest Batchelder is recent work by Pasadena Craftsman Tile. **ABOVE** For a Belle Epoque bathroom that looks original, David Heide Design Studio used classic off-white subway tiles with a listello and bullnose cap, and hexagon mosaics for the floor.



**LEFT** Using color to create pattern, this floor of hexagon and square mosaics was designed by Bo Sullivan, who may have channeled the more whimsical suggestions depicted in tile manufacturers' catalogs ca. 1905–1912. **FAR LEFT** A basketweave pattern (this variant is called wicker-weave in old catalogs) and hex tiles; mosaics extend to penny rounds, octagons, squares—and endless layout patterns.

## Mosaics are tiles of 2" x 2" or smaller—

which may be used to create a larger pattern (called a mosaic). The tiles, including designs for borders, most often are **pre-mounted to make them easy to install**. White with black accents was long a standard; color mosaics date back to ca. 1900–1920s. **Grout color is critical** and integral to the overall design; grey tones are the most prevalent and forgiving.

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **cuerva seca** A tile-making method using a waxy mineral mix to create a barrier to separate glazes.
- **deco** A decorative tile featuring a distinct pattern or design, or relief.
- **encaustics** Long-wearing tiles with an inlaid pattern produced from

different colored clays layered into depressions in a mold.

- **geometrics** Made using the same method as encaustic tiles, but without a pattern; colored blocks are typically square or triangular.
- **grout** Specialty mortar product used to fill joints between tile units, creating a water-repellent surface. Not to be confused with caulk.
- **Hispano-Moresque** A style blending historical Spanish and Islamic influences including brilliantly colored Persian and Iznik designs. Popularly re-interpreted by dozens of Southern California tile makers in the 1920s and '30s, most famously Malibu Potteries.
- **listel / listello** A narrow border,

used as a linear design element, primarily on walls.

- **mural** Compositions where each tile is one piece of the overall picture.
- **panel** A linear composition creating a vertical or horizontal mural, often seen in fireplace surrounds.
- **scenic tiles** Those that picture a vignette, such as a landscape or figure (e.g., a knight on horseback). May be part of a mural or panel; especially popular in the 1910s–20s.
- **tube lining** Also called *Cuenca*-style tiles, those made with thin lines of clay that form basins to separate different glazes (think of cloisonné.)
- **unglazed tile** Dense tiles without a surface glaze. They have good slip-resistance, but require sealing.



**LEFT** A handful of British and American companies make glazed tiles similar to these Aesthetic tile panels in a Victorian mansion. **RIGHT** Square mosaics, a Moravian Brocade deco, and an encaustic floor tile.



**LEFT** Authentic, Dutch-made tile is available through Country Floors and others. **ABOVE** California tile in the Spanish tradition is made today by Native Tile. **RIGHT** (top) Tile Restoration Center produces carved relief tiles in the tradition of Batchelder and Claycraft. • (bottom) Geometric and encaustic tile, revived during the Victorian era from medieval techniques, is popular in conservatories as well as urban vestibules.



## BY STYLE, BY REGION, BY ERA

Subway tile had a long run, as did floor mosaics and the four-inch pastel tiles ubiquitous in mid-century ranches. **Other tile installations were peculiar to a time or place.** As you design a new installation, take into account the architectural context. An Aesthetic Movement tile fireplace surround is so very different from a spare Arts & Crafts or Batchelder example. Each complements other treatments to create a recognizable style. • **Region** plays a huge role. The **brilliant colors of California tile evoke the Southwest**, where they are compatible with the area's heritage—and also with the climate: exterior stair risers lined in tile might fare poorly in a place where winter brings repeated freeze-thaw cycles. Still, such tile would be welcome inside a Mediterranean Revival house, even on the East Coast. • **Tile may point to an era:** white subway tiles used with dark grout in a turn-of-the-century scullery; blue-and-white Dutch tiles in a 300-year-old British country house.

## SELECTED TILEmakers

Here and on page 87, we've compiled a list of makers whose unique offerings are specific to time, place, or style.

Add these possibilities to the familiar, often budget-friendly if predictable brands sold at home-improvement stores, such as Daltile and its subsidiary American Olean.

**AMERICAN RESTORATION TILE** [restorationtile.com](http://restorationtile.com) Authentic tile for restoration or new work; unglazed mosaics for floors

**AMSTERDAM CORP.** [dutchtile.com](http://dutchtile.com) Authentic hand-formed &-painted, tin-glazed tiles from The Netherlands

**CARREAUX DU NORD** [carreaudunord.com](http://carreaudunord.com) Hand-pressed, low-relief decos and field tile in matte and gloss glazes

**CLAY SQUARED TO INFINITY** [claysquared.com](http://claysquared.com) Handmade studio tile for architectural use & accents, in Arts & Crafts, Prairie, and Art Nouveau styles

**HANDCRAFT TILE** [handcrafttile.com](http://handcrafttile.com) Since 1926, made-to-order tile known for relief designs & glaze colors; Arts & Crafts and California styles

**HERITAGE TILE** [heritagetile.com](http://heritagetile.com) Various divisions make authentic subway tile, mosaics, bungalow-era tile, Japanese tile

**L'ESPERANCE TILE WORKS** [lesperancetile.com](http://lesperancetileworks.com) Porcelain tiles in Victorian, Arts & Crafts, historical designs and glazes

**MEDICINE BLUFF STUDIO** [medicinebluffstudio.com](http://medicinebluffstudio.com) Intricate art tiles with animal/nature themes, for display or in installations

**MISSION TILE WEST** [missiontilewest.com](http://missiontilewest.com) Manufacturer of classics from the '20s and Malibu Revival tiles; also dealer for hundreds of historical tile lines

**MORAVIAN TILE WORKS** [buckscounty.org/visitor](http://buckscounty.org/visitor) Henry Mercer's pottery is a living-history museum still in production: re-issued "Mosaic Brocade" relief & figural tiles, pavers, fireplace sets



**MOTAWI TILEWORKS** [motawi.com](http://motawi.com) Innovative tile-maker offering a large and growing array of historical and inspired designs, Arts & Crafts through mid-century

**NATIVE TILE & CERAMICS** [nativetile.com](http://nativetile.com) Handmade decorative tile in California Mission, Spanish, and Craftsman styles

**ORIGINAL STYLE** [originalstyle.com](http://originalstyle.com) British Victorian wall and floor tiles for kitchen, bath & more; budget-friendly "modern" encaustics and geometrics

**PASADENA CRAFTSMAN TILE** [pasadenacraftsmantile.com](http://pasadenacraftsmantile.com) Custom hand-cast, -carved, and -glazed tile installations; also reproduction Batchelder tile

**PEWABIC** [pewabic.org](http://pewabic.org) Architectural tiles and giftware from a company started in 1903, celebrated for such specialties as iridescent glazes

**PRATT & LARSON CERAMICS** [prattandlarsen.com](http://prattandlarsen.com) Versatile handcrafted tile in many style lines and glazes

**RAVENSTONE TILES** [ravenstonetiles.com](http://ravenstonetiles.com) Handmade art tiles in Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau motifs

**ROOKWOOD** [rookwood.com](http://rookwood.com) Company renowned for its glazes, founded in 1880 by Maria Longworth Storer

**TERRA FIRMA HANDMADE TILE** [terrafirmamarttile.com](http://terrafirmamarttile.com) Handmade tiles in nature-inspired designs for fireplace, kitchen, bath, pool

**TILE RESTORATION CENTER** [tilerestorationcenter.com](http://tilerestorationcenter.com) Restoration; and reproduction tile in the style of Ernest Batchelder

FOR MORE RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 87.

**LEFT** (top to bottom) A recent installation of iridescent-glazed tiles by the venerable company Pewabic. • Glossy 'Hare' tile by Carreaux du Nord. • Classic blue-and-white Dutch tiles from Amsterdam Corp. • 'Oakleaf and Acorn' deco from Ravenstone. • 'Upside Downside' is a tile design taken from a lithograph by 20th-century wildlife illustrator Charley Harper, from Motawi Tileworks. • Hand-cut 'Peacock' tiles are from Clay Squared to Infinity. • Authentic flat subway tiles, here in a crackle glaze, from Heritage Tile/Subway Ceramics. • Individual relief tiles and mosaics create a mural, by Terra Firma Handmade Art Tile.