

TILE BY FIRE



The story—and the artist—behind the striking handcrafted tile that adorns structures throughout Calabasas’ city center.

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Visitors to Calabasas can't help but notice the gorgeous tile work that adorns many of the public structures—from the fountains and amphitheater at the city library to the façade of the Senior Center.

The colorful tile work was done by Diana Mausser and her company, Native Tile & Ceramics. Her first project for the city dates back to 2008, when the new Calabasas City Hall and Civic Center complex was built. She was hired to create two fountains—one in front of the complex and another at the entrance to the public library.

“The new complex was designed in the Mediterranean style, and the architect referenced a peacock fountain that is on the grounds of the historic Adamson House in Malibu. I've had a very extensive and intimate relationship with the Adamson House and

Malibu Lagoon Museum for over 30 years, so the architect's inspiration hit a nice chord with me,” Diana says.

Still she wanted to figure out a way to include some local flavor.

“I really felt the need to create something that was not so literally connected to the iconic Malibu Potteries peacock fountain. I wanted to create something that would be completely unique for the Calabasas property and at the same time incorporate some historical reference.”

After doing some research, she discovered that locals really supported the notion of conservation and preserving nature.

“So I proposed that the tile fountains have a ‘tree of life’ motif, incorporating flora and fauna that thrive in the nearby Santa Monica Mountains. I also included the names of most

of the wildlife and plants as a design element of the murals, to serve as identification for educational purposes. I included design elements from the historic peacock fountains as well.”

After the fountains at City Hall and the library were complete, city officials asked Diana to tile the outdoor amphitheater and an additional fountain at the library. Her next project, in 2015, focused on the new Senior Center. Native Tile was hired to create the tile on the front of the building as well as a fountain in the back courtyard.

THE CALLING

Diana realized her artistic calling while growing up in the South Bay. At a very young age, she sewed her own clothes, while creatively



ARTISTIC VISION
A fountain at the
Calabasas Senior Center



changing the store-bought patterns that she worked from.

"I liked to hang out in the Cotton Shop fabric store in Hermosa Beach when I was a child," she shares. "I was so excited about all of the fabrics that I wanted to wear them!"

Her love for creating didn't stop with clothes. In the 1970s, she made and sold macramé plant hangers and watchbands and beaded necklaces. "I loved art and designing things," she says.

Diana later pursued a B.A. degree at UCLA, majoring in ceramics and textile design and also studying printmaking and photography. "After my first class in ceramics, I was completely hooked," she recalls. "The more I was exposed to it, the more I realized how detailed and technical it is. With the chemical process, it is science and art in one. I had a lot of happy accidents when first learning, which made me very excited about the possibilities."

THE AWAKENING

Diana graduated from UCLA, attended California College of the Arts in Oakland for one year and then worked at a few LA tile companies. Then she had an awakening.

"A client for the company I worked for as a glaze technician opened my eyes to California tile history and made me aware of the great potential for tile," Diana explains.

"He wanted a tile depicting a carved image of a medieval knight on a horse slaying a dragon restored and reproduced, which was out of the scope of the company's usual services. I convinced my supervisor that I could do it, and I did!"

Driven by a passion for formulating her own glazes and colors and deriving creative inspiration from the historic arts and crafts tile of the late Ernest Batchelder, Diana set out to forge her own path in the tile industry. With barely enough money for a kiln and rent, she started Native Tile & Ceramics in 1990, inside a 500-square-foot shed.

Her creative wings took flight, and

she began crafting her own versions of California-style tile designs. The business flourished, and eight years later she moved to the company's current quaint studio: a 1940s bungalow in Old Torrance.

THE CRAFT

With a commitment to exceptional quality and time-honored tile crafting, Diana and her team of 10 artistic employees hand press, glaze and fire each tile, as the resident cats and chickens look on. With an array of custom-mixed colors (from muted to vibrant) and unique timeless designs, Native Tile & Ceramics produces five distinct tile styles: vintage Californian with an antique and watercolor look; Malibu-style with crisp lines and a graphic design appearance; Cuenca-style with raised lines that originated in Spain; relief with carved patterns; and Tunisian with a distinct gloss and varied line quality.

Today Diana is credited with designing more than 1,100 historically inspired Craftsman, Spanish and Moorish-style tiles, which have beautified numerous noteworthy buildings, including the Avenue of the Peninsula shopping center, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Pasadena Conservatory of Music, the Rose Bowl Stadium and the Biltmore hotel in Santa Barbara ... to name a few. Native Tile has also done work for private homes, including those owned by Steven Spielberg, Kevin Costner, Robert Downey Jr., Diane Keaton, George Lucas and Madonna.

When asked what is on the creative horizon now, Diana says with smiling eyes, "I am always ready for another dragon to light up my imagination." ■