

Meet Diana Mausser of Native Tile & Ceramics



Diana Mausser

April 2019

VoyageLA

Today
we'd
like
to
introduce
you
to
Diana
Mausser

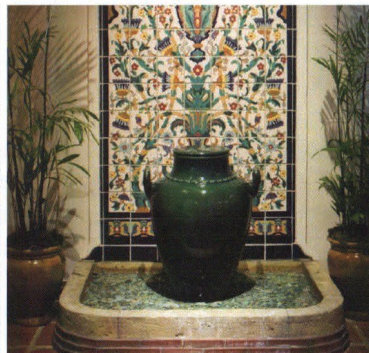
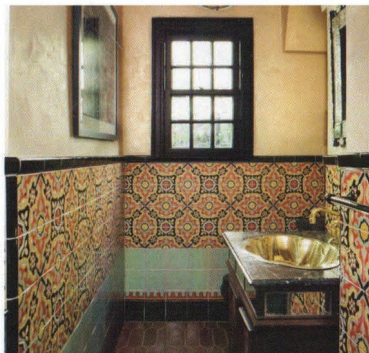
Diana, let's start with your story. We'd love to hear how you got started and how the journey has been so far.

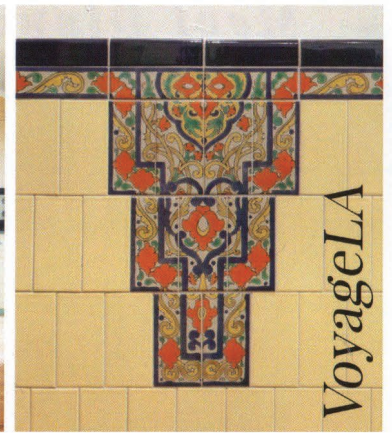
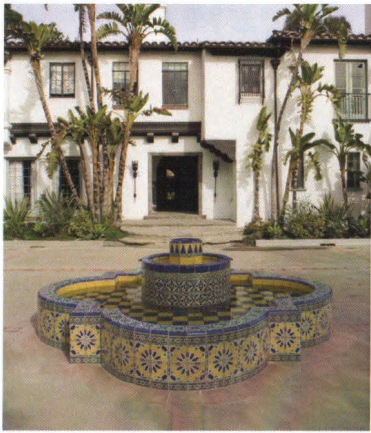
I started Native Tile in 1990, four years after graduating from UCLA with a degree in design. While at UCLA, I focused on ceramics and textile design. After spending one year at CCAC in Oakland working on a master's degree in textile design and then working at several ceramic tile companies in the South Bay, I became convinced that I wanted to focus on ceramics as my medium of choice. Starting my own tile company seemed to be the one way I could attempt to make a living if I wanted to continue to work in clay.

Creating ornately patterned tiles merged my two passions, ceramics, and textile design into one expression. During those early years, my passion for tile was fueled as I became more aware of the rich tile making history in Southern California. While I was looking for a studio space to get Native Tile started, my UCLA colleague and friend Gary Steinborn (Venice Clay) suggested I look on Glencoe Avenue in Marina del Rey. Expensive rent left me discouraged, but while on my search I noticed a wooden shed with a caved-in roof fenced within a small boat-building yard.

Seeing potential, I convinced the owners to let me rent the 500 square foot space with the condition that they fix the roof. The rent was \$375 a month. I scraped up \$1,200 to buy my first Cress kiln, had an electrician friend put in

Check out some of her work below:





electricity, and Native Tile was officially open for business. A couple of years into the business it became apparent that I needed help with selling my product. Artists are known for not being the best at selling their work, and I am no exception, so I sought out representation through tile showrooms.

Native Tile was fortunate to have caught the interest of Norman Karlson, founder, and owner of Country Floors, one of the biggest and most prestigious showrooms in the country. We are still working with Country Floors today. I have since moved the company to a new studio space in a converted 1940's bungalow in an industrial part of Old Torrance where we have more room to incorporate all stages of tile manufacturing in a peaceful environment.

In combination with our dedicated showrooms, developing relationships with our own clients and the creation of a great web site from Jeff Smith (Tornado Creative), we are still going strong creating beautiful hand made ceramic tile.

Overall, has it been relatively smooth? If not, what were some of the struggles along the way?

As with any small business, there have been many struggles. Starting the business on my own with very little capital was the first struggle. I had to work another job for the first year or so to keep things going. Next was the time it took to develop relationships with representatives so that I could really start selling the work. This was how the industry worked at that time... there was no internet back then.

Once we started to gain momentum and a strong reputation, the economic downturn hit. The struggling economy in combination with the rise in internet use and people wanting to "go direct" rather than use a tile showroom and the dominant architectural style moving to more modern was a deadly combination for the growth of my business. We had to downsize drastically and basically wait it out in a sense.

During that time, I worked on establishing my own customer relationships and launched a new web site to develop a better internet presence.

Alright – so let's talk business. Tell us about Native Tile & Ceramics – what should we know?

At Native Tile, we manufacture handmade decorative ceramic tile in styles that are reminiscent of those that would be found in historic California Spanish/Mediterranean and Craftsman bungalows. With my education in ceramics, we are proud of the glaze colors and textures we have developed and incorporate into our tiles.

Our strong sense of design shines through in our ornate patterns. Every aspect of our tile manufacturing is done at our studio in Old Torrance, so we are in control of and take pride in the quality of every piece of tile we make.

As a designer, I work one on one with my showroom representatives and clients enabling us to communicate more directly and clearly. I believe all of these strengths set us apart from others.

Any shoutouts? Who else deserves credit in this story – who has played a meaningful role?

I believe we could not be who we were and survived these last 29 years without our showrooms and representatives. Some of them have stuck with us all these years.

- NS Ceramic in Santa Barbara - Country Floors (Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York) - Alchemy Materials in New York - Filmore Clark in Los Angeles;

Other individuals: - Jim Sullivan – Sullivan Ceramics – an endless resource of information on the ceramic process – probably my most important mentor and a dear friend; - Gary Steinborn – Venice Clay – a good friend and sounding board - Jeff Smith – Tornado Creative – created the new Native Tile web site and through the process taught me to use communication tools to help grow my business in the modern day; - Norman Karlson (passed away in 2018)- Country Floors founder – He gave Native Tile a chance and believed in us all these years.

Team Mates: - Ken Ando – my longest standing and most loyal employee who started with Native Tile back in the "boatyard days" and continues to be an invaluable asset and friend.

