Ceramic tiles stack up in popularity

by Denise Sautters

Beautiful, yet functional. Once relegated to floors and countertops, ceramic tile has evolved into a fresh way to decorate a home and give it panache, say tile experts.

ZINNIA KITCHEN - Handcrafted tiles by Meredith Collection, featuring zinnias, accent the stove area in this kitchen. CNS Photo courtesy of Royalty-Free/Corbis. "I think more and more people are using handcrafted tiles because they are finally seeing how you can mix design and function together," said Bridget O'Connor, a designer with Artfind Tile in Wooster, Ohio. "There are no limitations to the design possibilities or personalities you are able to create in a home."

Still being used for floors and countertops, decorative tile is also being used for fireplace surrounds and walls, said O'Connor. Generally, she said, people take her their house plans, whether building or remodeling, and point out the areas where they would like to use tile.

"These areas may be floors, back splashes, a fireplace or the master bath," said O'Connor. "I sit down with them and we look at the style of the home and get the feeling of the interior space they are looking for. In a lot of instances, I will direct my clients to bring in magazine pictures, photos, fabrics or any combination they are attracted to so we can come up with a theme of designated colors for those areas."

HANDCRAFTED TILES

Linda Christman, hand-painting manager for Meredith Tile in Canton, Ohio, said this year's new prints are the zinnia and pinecone.

"All of our designs are made from molds created from hand-carved originals," said Ron Williamson, marketing services director for the Meredith Collection. "Our tiles are inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th early 20th century.

"Thanks to a renewed interest in the craftsman style, both as a movement and integrated into mainstream design, interest in our products continues to grow," he said. "Meredith Collection was started in the 1980s and is now sold throughout the United States."

Christman said that the company's tiles are made-to-order, utilizing more than 40 glazes.

"When hand-painting is requested, our artists hand-paint layers of glaze directly into the bisque," she said. "As we paint, we do a lot of cleaning so our colors don't run together. Some of our designs are very detailed, others are not."

Guy Renkert, Meredith's president, said he believes consumers' interest inartistic tile comes down to what they want in their homes.

"I think what is happening, especially with the slowdown in the housing boom, is more people are deciding to renovate their current homes rather than abandon their current spaces and go build new," Renkert said. "In which case, the desire to recreate a quality and integrity of their older homes in driving them to find other authentic or handcrafted tile rather than mainstream, generic products."

BUDGET RESTRAINT

There is something to be said for decorative tiles found at home do-it-yourself, decor-hardware stores. Decorative tile is more expensive no matter where you get it, but if you shop from a national chain, prices tend to be less than when buying from a decorator.

Dee Clark, a design consultant in decor at Home Depot in Jackson Township, Ohio, said she sees about 5 percent of her customers choosing to add a decorative tile to their floors, and about 30 percent to 35 percent of them choosing decorative tile for walls, countertops and tabletops.

"I think the most common thing people do for floor tile is put it on the diagonal, but there are people who will put decorative tile onto the floor and make a pattern," said Clark. "There are customers who will buy wall tile and are much more likely to put a decorative listello (a tile insert) into a bathroom, or behind a countertop like behind the stove area."

Tile is very enduring so you have to be sure you like it.

"Whatever the design, many customers choose earth tones because you can decorate around them," said Clark.

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