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A NEW GENERATION OF **TILE OPTIONS** IS SHAKING UP THIS ANCIENT ART FORM WITH COLOR, PATTERN, AND TEXTURE.

BY TIM McKEOUGH
PRODUCED BY LAUREL J. BENEDUM

CERAMIC TILE HAS A SPLIT personality. On one hand, it is a product of utilitarian performance—a hard-wearing, impervious, hygienic surface that has become the cladding of choice for the most demanding environments, from hospitals to subway tunnels, public restrooms to prisons. On the other, it is an artistic product of the highest order, one that has communicated stories of culture, artistic achievement, and decorative flair for centuries.

Over the last decade, the utilitarian aspects of tile appeared to win out, as plain white subway tiles became de rigueur in kitchens and bathrooms. But the functionalist reign is coming to an end. Tile trends are now moving in a maximalist direction as designers >

Tiles from Ann Sacks, Balineum, Fornace Brioni, Popham Design, Sister Parish x Country Floors, and the Tile Shop. For individual tile names, see Resources.

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and manufacturers embrace more creative designs once again.

"I see a wave of people going for pattern, color, and even different textures," says designer Nicole Fuller, whose Whimsy collection of boldly geometric terrazzo tiles for Ann Sacks was inspired by 20th-century art. "Clients are now saying, 'Let me see that tile with the pale pink, yellow, and gray.' It's a really exciting time."

British designer Beata Heuman has also been experimenting with statement tile. "People are quite formulaic in how they design bathrooms, so it's easy to create character with something playful and unexpected," she says. "It's such a great way of adding personality."

The rise of room-defining tile may feel like a long time coming, but it is actually the material's return to form. "Throughout history, there's always been a love of color and love of detail," says Terry Bloxham, assistant curator of ceramics and glass at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, who recently wrote *The Tile Book* (Thames & Hudson), a tome exploring the lavish ceramic items produced from the 13th century to the present day. "We're no different from our ancestors."



LEFT: The mosaic floor of a kitchen and dining room by Spanish designer Patricia Bustos gives off major Almodóvar vibes. **ABOVE:** Marco Braga Stripes Winter mosaic tile, \$110 per sq. ft.; bisazza.it. **BELOW:** Majolica tile creates a dramatic stairwell in a home in Ischia, Italy, designed by Giuliano Andrea dell'Uva.

Today, however, the range of ceramic options is broader than ever, thanks to the blossoming of small-scale makers as well as new technology that is allowing established manufacturers to invent tiles that weren't previously possible.

"Technological advances have had a huge impact," says Luke Crownover, product manager at the Tile Shop, pointing to high-definition printing, which can give ceramic the look of marble or wood; metallic glazes; high-polish finishes; and manufacturing capabilities that allow for the creation of deeply textural three-dimensional tile. "We've taken the next step forward, and all the manufacturers are just playing with the technology to see what they can do."

Dazzling tiles are also turning up in places beyond bathrooms, kitchens, and mudrooms. Fuller has installed mosaic murals—depicting birds, butterflies, and branches—on walls around fireplaces and in dressing rooms. "I'm defining spaces with patterned tile, where it becomes more of an artistic piece," she says.

Even in rooms that call for slightly more subdued ceramics, designers are bypassing basic white tile in favor of options that offer nuanced color and texture. Martin Brudnizki,

for instance, clad some walls of Pink Mamma restaurant in Paris with green rectangular tile in varying sizes and shades. "The older a tile looks, the better it feels, so we used different shades of green," he says. "It creates an aged look with an extra layer of patina."

That's a well-understood concept for Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch of Roman and Williams, who have long been masters of designing new spaces with an immediate sense of history. "Too often, tile is made to look synthetic, when its natural characteristics and glaze are its greatest assets," Alesch says. "We let the variation, the technique of firing, and the material speak loudly."

Sometimes, that mind-set produces interiors with installations of simple tiles that have just enough color and texture to stand out from the crowd. Other times, it results in something wildly original, like an abstract tile-based mural behind the bar at Chicago's Café Integral or showers lined with blue-and-white oceanic scenes recalling Portuguese azulejos at Greydon House, a boutique hotel on Nantucket. Traditional Portuguese tile "told stories of trade, travel, and exploration," Standefer notes. "The showers at Greydon House are so intimate, you feel like you're out at sea." ■