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TAKING A SHINE TO REFLECTIVE TILE

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are now taking
center stage

TAKING SHINE REFLECTIVE TILE





BY JEFFREY STEELE

PHOTO COURTESY: GLASTILE, INC.

ONE OF THE FASTEST-growing segments of the business at Ashland, Ore.-based Hakatai Enterprises Inc. is the company's glass mosaic mural business.

Customers provide Hakatai with favorite photographs, whether of a canal scene in Venice, a tranquil beach along the ocean, perhaps even themselves. The company then renders that photograph as a unique glass mosaic mural.

"It's a good business to be in," says Hakatai marketing associate Adam Shigemoto. "People want something different from ceramic tile. They want the space they're putting the mural in to be more reflective, more open. Glass really opens up an area, and it's very eye-catching as well. You can do a lot of custom work like murals with glass, which makes that space your own."

Another day, another application for reflective tile, which is turning out to be a tile industry success story in a less-than-robust era. More and more, glass tile and metallic tile — and often some combination of the two — are being introduced in new and head-turning colors, sizes, shapes and designs.

The interest in reflective tile likely has its roots in a larger trend toward cleaner lines, says Ryan Calkins, president of Seattle's Statements Tile & Stone, a 14-year-old, family-owned wholesale importer and distributor. The Tuscan look that dominated new home construction during the last "up cycle" has given way to more contemporary looks in everything from tile to fixtures and furnishing.

"Instead of tumbled travertine for entryways and halls, people are selecting honed limestones or large-format, rectified porcelains. Reflective tile like

glass, metal and glossy ceramics complement those clean lines," he says.

Bold colors characterized the first wave of glass tile 15 or 20 years ago, representing hues popular in that era, Calkins says. Regrettably, he adds, those timely colors became dated very quickly. Today's consumer seems to be more drawn to timeless colors that won't soon fade from style. "Over the past several years, our best-selling glass lines have included more muted colors: light browns, subtle greens, off-white colors and even some charcoal," he reports.

As for applications, Calkins says because reflective tile surfaces tend to be more susceptible to marring and scratching than porcelain tiles, his company is finding that glass and metallic tile is used more in settings like backsplashes and shower surrounds, where they aren't as vulnerable to damage.

Increasing options

The ascendancy of reflective tile has caught the eye of Mid-America Tile, an Elk Grove Village, Ill.-based tile distributor that sells glass and metal tile, as well as ceramic, porcelain and natural stone tile and other covering materials.

"We're finding a lot more offerings of glass tile," says Mid-America's marketing coordinator Dan Skowron, who says glass-and-stone mosaics are big.

"It seems like all the glass tile manufacturers have really come out with a lot of new styles, possibly because of the availability of new products from China, along with improved quality compared with what China formerly produced."

Mid-America Tile is the exclusive Midwest distributor of the Modono Glass Tile Collection manufactured in



PHOTO COURTESY: GLASTILE, INC.

Rochester, NY. Introduced in 2008, the Modono Glass Tile Collection is known for textile patterns and shifting, vibrant colors. The result can be bold and extreme, soft and comforting or rich and elegant.

Metal, too, is on the upswing, in part because of its variety. "They can do almost any kind of finish, from pewter to bronze," Skowron says.

Barbara Vasquez is another industry figure who has witnessed the surge in interest in metal and particularly glass tile, which she says appeals to today's more value-oriented consumer and homeowner. "Customers walk in here and say, 'I need value for my money,'" Vasquez relates, adding she urges them to "choose glass for the wide range of colors, textures and styles."

There are endless patterns and color combinations possible in glass and/or glass-and-stone mosaics, she added.

"You can cut glass into various sizes and lengths, to achieve any look you're after," she says. "They're laying glass tile on the horizontal, vertical or all-wall applications. I feel glass or glass-and-stone mosaics can complement just about any tile or stone selection."

Another factor in the uptick of glass is its increasing use in floors, where it accents or complements other materials and enhances designs, she says.

As for metallic tile, Vasquez says "they have any kind of metal right now that you would want to see," including stainless steel, bronze, pewter and hand-brushed nickel. Part of the appeal is that metal can be used in clean, contemporary applications or in rustic surroundings. The latter is particularly possible with brushed nickel and pewter, she reports. Reflective metal tiles are adding appeal and uniqueness to kitchen and bathroom backsplashes, barbecues and outdoor entertainment centers, where their purpose is generally as accents around counters, Vasquez says.

Across the country, Catherine O'Connor has been creating intriguing glass pieces for more than a dozen years at her Lockport, NY-based company called Art Effects Glass. Glass continues to be popular for her, but in evolving sizes and styles. She is now creating larger glass tiles, some 14 by 14 inches, with "large patterns and a very graphic in nature," she says.

She is also producing increasing numbers of glass pieces with metallic leaf infused into the glass, she says. "Even with the increased price, [customers] still like the precious metals as part of the glass tile design."

And with growing regularity, glass is moving into other design elements that complement the tile. For instance, she says, her business has expanded from accent tile to cabinet door inserts, lighting shades, coordinating glass knobs for door handles, and dinnerware and silverware that coordinates as well.

"I'll get a request from a customer saying, 'I'm doing a backsplash that involves glass accent tile or full glass tile,

and can I get a glass cabinet door insert to coordinate, as well as knobs that coordinate?'" she says. "People know I do glass plates and bowls, and will ask for a piece to complement that."

Another recent project was even more unusual and artsy, involving a solid surface composite of Corian used as a wall, into which inserts of oddly-shaped glass tile were cut. "That's the art ability," O'Connor says. "With a small studio like the one I have, I can bring the avantgarde art to different applications."

More common applications call for the use of full glass or glass accents, the latter for glass block installations. "A lot of people have existing glass block, and want it to look artier," she says.

Advice for dealers

O'Connor's advice to dealers is to recognize the potential in custom work. "Dealers have not embraced the idea of custom," she says. "They basically want 'what you see is what you get.' They're eliminating an entire revenue stream by avoiding custom. The designers know this, and they are coming directly to us. But there are some forward-thinking dealers who get it."

Custom design is not expensive, O'Connor adds. "Custom design is affordable. The thing about custom is every piece is new and different, and that's what drives the market — new and different," she concludes.

One of the nation's foremost glass tile producers is GlasTile Inc., a 21-year-old producer of glass tile in Greensboro, NC. President and CEO Barbara Cashman says her business is growing because patrons seek the unusual and distinctive, and not necessarily only in reflective tile. "They're looking at wood, leather and bamboo tiles, which provide a different feel and look," she says.

"I do believe people are looking at something that's a little different, and expresses their own individuality in an environmental manner."

GlasTile's line is geared to high-end residential and glitzy commercial



applications, she says. One of the more popular offerings is its very reflective and opaque copper-encased tile, which when used in kitchen and bathroom backsplash applications maintains its brightness and reflectivity.

"The reflective material attracts a lot more attention, interest and vitality in the installation," she says. "Glass and metal, either in combination or alone, make a statement about the ambience of a room. That's a reason we just had that tile go into a bathroom installation at Pensacola's Hotel Indigo."

Another of GlasTile's product lines is called Marquisa Satins, which features a fired-on metallic finish on glass and is offered in three colors. Brienne is a bronze, Avallon a stainless steel, and Giselle resembles a 24-carat satin gold. Launched five years ago, Marquisa Satins' popularity has never been higher, and it is now being used in custom configurations like random mosaics.

"We just did an HGTV show, and used it in kitchen backsplashes, in a custom configuration of all three colors in mounted 2-by-2s," Cashman says.

Even more popular than the Marquisa Satins is GlasTile's trademark mirror-backed tile, which is offered in two versions. Crystal Visions is a smooth tile, while Tifini is a crushed glass tile that provides a look like diamonds.

A top-selling item at GlasTile for nearly the entire history of the company, this tile features a true mirror chemically bonded to the back of transparent colored glass, so the light goes through the tile's coloring and bounces back.

Used in a fireplace, the tile won the 2008 Crystal Achievement Award from Glass magazine, leading to its application in a high-profile Puerto Rico hospital lobby. "The Crystal Visions and Tifini are GlasTile's signature lines, and what we are best known for," Cashman says. "No one else does that."

Hakatai Enterprises, which was founded in 1997, has held a focus on glass tile throughout its history. After moving to Oregon in the first years of the last decade, the company launched its successful website and in 2006 unveiled custom blends and custom gradients that gave customers more opportunities to tailor a look, and more reason to choose Hakatai.

Hakatai also distributes a number of metallic tiles, as well as combination glass-and-metal and glass-and-stone tiles. Among its popular metal tiles are special order brushed steel, antique copper, polished copper, brushed titanium, polished titanium and a black metal. All in all, it offers nine metal finishes and 10 sizes.

But it's the glass tile for which the

company is best known. Hakatai glass tile finds its way into kitchen and bath backsplashes and showers. Glass tile also works very effectively in entryways and fireplaces, Hakatai has found. In entryways, for instance, where tight space behind a closed door often translates to a darker area, glass tile can bring a welcome brightness, he says. That's particularly true if reds and yellows are represented in the tile.

In addition, fireplaces benefit strongly from glass tile that features some form of iridescence, he adds. "If there's iridescence in the tile, it can draw attention to the fireplace by reflecting the light of the fire, and brightening the room," he reports. "In a home bar area, glass tile is a popular means of making the setting brighter and more attractive. And many times [customers] will want a custom mural that makes the area distinctively their own." [TD](#)

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