

DEVELOPMENTS IN DECORATION

By Tina Luton

Tiles are a fashion product and just as fashionistas – those die-hard trendsetters – are constantly on the look out for ‘the next big thing’ to set them apart from the fashion pack, architects and designers are also always scouting for something different.

Just like fashion, changes in residential decoration (colour, texture etc) and in decorative features or accessories (listelli, borders, feature panels, etc) are often borne from reinvention.

Most recently, these changes have seen a resurgence of feature walls as the decorative element in a tiling project. This trend was popular in the 1960s, reinforcing the adage that, eventually, ‘everything old is new again’.

The change in decorative features has come at the expense of listelli, which were popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Borders are still widely used but the styles and range of materials have changed dramatically, largely due to breakthroughs in technology.

The past decade has seen a gradual decline in the traditional use of listelli and decorated tiles, which have been replaced by contemporary use of mosaics made of glass, stone and metals, as evidenced by a strong presence last year at Cersaie and more recently at Cevisama.

Colour and decoration continue to be the mainstays of design in ceramic tile production. Italy and Spain, the two main producer countries of frits, glazes and colours, remain the driving force behind product innovation alongside Italian technology suppliers.

Cersaie and Cevisama both showcased a huge variety of wall and floor tiles embellished with metallic glazes, textured with soft geometrics, hammered and brush stroke effects, alongside decorative wallpaper tiles and silhouette botanical designs.

The use of bright colour is on the increase along with more complex interplays of hue, texture and sheen. Stone is a medium that never appears to fade in popularity, with many tiles on display complimented by stone mosaic panels and borders. Glass mosaic is still popular



Mediterranean mosaic highlights from Decocer.



Natural stone mosaics from Decor8 Tiles.



Textured ceramic tiles in bold gold and stunning silver.

together with metal – both real metal mosaic and increasingly, metallic glazed ceramic tile.

TECHNOLOGIES SET THE TREND

Avante garde manufacturing processes have taken decoration to new heights, with companies now able to replicate almost any texture, from stone, wood, fur and leather, on ceramic tile in greater numbers and in shorter periods of time.

Most of these new technologies come from Italy.

Rotocolor technology is considered the international benchmark for ceramic tile decoration. The latest innovations, the S5 Universal and the Rotojet, were unveiled at Cevisama 2006 and have already been ordered by some of the larger European manufacturers.

The S5 Universal draws together all the best characteristics of previous models and further raises the quality standard of the final decoration.

One of the bonuses of this machine is that it can utilise all cylinder versions from standard length to LL with a decoration length from 720 to 1,440 mm, allowing users to adopt all cylinders in their possession on a single machine.

The machine offers improved printing definition due to high-precision laser photocells for piece detection and high-performance control systems. Recipe memorisation assures more reliable product repeatability, while product changeovers are quick and simple due to automatic cylinder extraction and squeegee replacement.

The Rotojet is an inkjet decoration device that has been developed in conjunction with Kerajet. Specially designed to be integrated with the Rotocolor S5 Universal, it offers improved performance and allows for the simultaneous creation of rotogravure and inkjet technology decorations for special effects with high-aesthetic impact. The machine allows for unlimited colour variations and decorations up to nine metres in length, as well as decorations on highly-textured surfaces and limited and/or highly customised production batches.

The ultimate objective is to develop a single technology that combines the use of silicone with inkjet in order to offer a full range of decoration effects and to meet any production requirement.

System and Kerajet are currently experimenting with ceramic pigment-based colours to obtain the same results that Kerajet currently achieves with organometallic colours. This potential new application would pave the way for the complete integration of the two technologies, reducing management costs of inkjet application and simplifying product manufacture, while delivering more sophisticated aesthetic effects and brighter and more intense colours.

Other breakthroughs include InkCid, the digital technology developed between Torrecid and Durst, which allows ceramic tiles to compete more effectively with other materials such as natural stone, glass and wood; and the Gamma 60, one of the world's first digital ceramic printing systems.

Also developed by Durst, this proprietary synchronised inline printing system is capable of producing an unlimited number of different tiles from a given model and decorating the tile surface with full bleed. When printing onto tile with strong reliefs, the entire surface of the tile is decorated with perfect definition. The Gamma 60 has already been installed in several leading ceramic companies in Italy. Using just four colours, the machine is capable of producing any colour or shade.

FORECASTS FOR THE FUTURE

According to the Color Association of the United States, which forecasts trends for manufacturers of environmental and interior products, 2007 and 2008 will see a shift from stark colours to pale, bleached tones and muddled natural hues. Decorations are subtle, featuring two-tone or luminous saturated shades - from sunny yellow to blushing violets - with dignified opaques, gentle metallics and pearly surfaces.

"Great news, instead of merely trying to imitate stone, ceramic tile is finally getting back to its strengths - namely a designed decorative surface using colour, texture and format, together with the functionality that performs better than many competing materials!" said Peter Halliday of Decor8 Tiles, which commenced operation in 2005 and offers an off-the-shelf range of decorative border and feature wall products as well as a complete bespoke design and manufacturing service.

As most industry insiders are aware, third-fire ceramic decoration was originally designed to recover second-quality tiles, with surface blemishes being masked by flowers etc, painted or printed on the surface. From this, a whole industry was born that has driven or influenced the design of ceramic tiles for decades. Manufacturers and retailers realised they could drive better margins on the decorative components - the value-added aspect. The decorative element was also a way of differentiating the plain coloured wall or floor tile.

In the late 1970s, through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Heritage-style borders were all the rage. These were mainly



Alpha Ceramica thinks pink.



Mosaic combinations remain the cornerstone of Artistic Stone.



Southern Cross Ceramics embraces minimalism with the Stripes range of glass mosaics.



The eye-catching Matrix range in red-hot chilli.

DECORATIVE DECADES

1950s: square tiles, ceramic and glass mosaics and small, embossed listello borders complementing wall tiles, set the trend.

1960s: individual decorative feature tiles inserted among plain tiles were all the rage.

1970s: a shift to bright-coloured ceramic mosaics, notably red, orange and lime green. Decoration was bright, red-and-blue geometric shapes. Mosaics were primarily imported from Japan. Italian tiles became popular with the emergence of the 200 mm format.

1980s: the global expansion of the Italian tile industry. Floral, single-feature tiles and six or nine tile panels over a bath made a decorative splash, along with Australian Federation-style borders – gum leaves, gum nuts etc.

1990s: an explosion in listello or border decoration. Instead of selling nine feature tiles, retailers (and decorators) could sell 25 border tiles.

2000: a shift in decorative borders to materials other than ceramic, such as glass, marble and metal. To fit with the minimalist trend, feature walls in a different colour, material or size were used more widely. Often, the only decorative tiling element in a room was a combination of a large tile with a mosaic version of the same tile.

2007: feature walls are still popular but the tile itself is the decorative element. Damask wallpaper finishes, metallic glazes, curved, glossy surfaces that reflect the light in bright colours and pressed textures all create a visually stimulating surface that is touted to remain popular into 2008 and beyond.

reproductions of English Victorian designs in a single screen print. It was very low-tech but revolutionary all the same, and driven by the renovation boom in Australia.

“Everyone wanted old-world designs which, given Australia’s history, were mainly English designs that were derived from Greek and Roman classical design,” said Peter. “Towards the end of the 1980s we were making big six and eight tile floral panels and featured tile spotters over baths – copies of Italian designs, because local importers were finding it so hard to keep decorative tile in stock. We made the jump to producing listelli or thinner borders in the early 1990s. That jump was driven by

what was happening overseas and it helped us to break out of the 200 x 100 mm Federation and Heritage rut. By printing multiple border designs on a single tile, then cutting them into strips after firing, cost savings could be passed onto the consumer keeping our local products competitive. Again production economics influenced the creative product,” he added.

Glass mosaic, which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s, has become popular again over the past seven years and this has had a huge impact on consumers and tile decoration companies alike. Unable to keep pace, many smaller tile decorators closed, while companies specialising in stone and glass mosaic grew. The companies that survived had to change.

COLOUR AND COMBINATIONS

The swing back to more decoration on tiles and the increasing use of colour will see further developments in decorative products and up the ante for companies to create interesting combinations of stone, glass, metal and ceramic to compliment the ever-changing fashion.

Brendon Smith from Artistic Stone said even though mosaics have always been a core part of business, the company has had to move with the times to keep pace with a growing list of competitors.

“We know what sells in terms of combinations because we have always manufactured custom designs and combinations for our clients, but with the industrialisation of China and the ever-improving quality of affordable products coming out of there, we now have to look to design and produce mosaic combinations over there and bring it in as stock rather than custom-make it in Australia,” he said.

Brendon explained that bringing a high-end, custom product out as a stock item is risky because what sells in one state of Australia might not sell in another.

“On the whole, Victoria is more interior design focussed – they love high-end, funky and art deco-style interiors. Queensland is more focussed on the outdoors and bringing the outside in, which has to do with climate and lifestyle. That’s historical, and more than likely that will change with new techniques to produce high-end products at mass-produced prices,” he said.

Melbourne-based Southern Cross Ceramics specialises in complimentary product and plans to continue extending their range over the coming year.

Managing director Matt Venn, who took over from his father, Chris, last year, says while the shift in fashion trends away from ceramic decorators over recent years to minimalist products, such as natural stone and glass, has been a challenge, it has also provided the company, which has an extensive on-site R&D facility, with increased opportunity to venture into more diverse ranges of colour and texture. Examples include the Rococo wallpaper tiles and the bolder, braver Stripes and Matrix glass mosaic ranges.

“We are decoration specialists and we aim to be a world leader in the field of ceramic decoration. We are always trying to broaden our range – the products we have now are vastly different to the ones we were doing in 1989,” said Matt.

“We spend a lot of time looking at the market, we keep abreast of what the wholesalers are doing and we invest in technology to stay in front. We also look at leading indicators in other industries, such as fashion, furniture, fabrics and automotive, to see what colour trends are emerging. We have our own laboratory and we test and experiment with glazes and have extensive glaze control to ensure colour accuracy,” he added.

Matt, and sales and marketing manager Sandy Hercus, believe that while change is exciting, some things will remain the cornerstone of the business.

“We maintain a large range of products, because the conservative look is always going to be there – it’s still big in the US. Minimalism will also stay, but it is changing in terms of size and format and to keep pace we have introduced a range of funkier lines. Minimalism is a broad term, but we see it as reducing colour and design to its simplest form, such as a design highlight or concentration of colour in a splashback or feature wall,” Matt explained.

Sandy added that while Australian consumers are more adventurous than Americans they still err on the side of caution when it comes to colour decoration.

“Australians love natural products like stone and glass and they like bright colours, but they often go with the more conservative option, so we have a range of reds, limes and oranges to complement the ‘safer’ sandstones, charcoals and chocolates.”

Red, in particular, is proving a big winner in the colour stakes. Matt feels this is largely subliminal and the result of a spin-off from a number of fashion-orientated industries.

“In Australia, factors such as the breast cancer research campaign have put pink in the forefront of people’s minds. As a result, a lot of brights currently have subtle pink undertones,” he said.

To put themselves in the pink – and to stay in the black – it is vital for ceramic tile manufacturers, retailers, designers and architects to stay on top of shifting fashion trends and the advances in technology that enable these products to remain cutting edge. 