



Love Affair with LIGHT

By Jeffrey Steele

Photo courtesy of GlasTile

Few coverings capture consumer imaginations like glass tile. It offers limitless possibilities in terms of both beauty and function. The clarity of glass renders it unique among wall and floor coverings in attracting, changing and enhancing light. And it goes with just about anything.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests in today's lackluster tile marketplace, glass has gone on outperforming its rivals. How could glass tile actually grow during the economic downturn, while other materials registered stagnant sales?

We put that question to an expert panel of glass tile industry authorities that begins with Barbara Cashman, who with husband John O'Brien is co-owner of GlasTile, a Greensboro, North Carolina-based company specializing in glass tile.

"Glass has been around for more than 4,000 years, and will never go out of style," says Cashman, who started as a maker of stained glass before moving into tile. "It's very tactile, very sensual. People have to touch it. It feels good to handle it. Glass comes alive in light. When it is well lit in a kitchen, or a bath, there is a deeper, more resonant quality. People feel better when they have this light . . . Nothing else in the industry has that love affair with light."

Glass offers specific qualities not found in other tile, Cashman adds. Glass is easy to maintain. It doesn't absorb stains. And in spite of the doubters, glass is also durable. When glass tiles were first

unveiled, Cashman says, customers would inquire, "Won't they break?" But glass tiles' durability has been demonstrated in many applications.

"It's definitely not fragile. We have bounced our tiles off our cement floors—not necessarily intentionally—but they do not break," she laughs. "I see ceramic tile break far more often. When you put the two side by side, glass has the durability of a six, a diamond a 10. They are very hard—and very durable."

Another factor fueling glass tile's ascendancy is its ability to showcase groundbreaking looks. "I tend to think artisan glass is a trend setter," Cashman says. "We are not afraid to try something new, not afraid to put something on the market and test it out. I'm always in research and development."

Catherine O'Connor, the artist in residence at Art Effects Glass in Lockport, NY, is another artisan who's unafraid to try something new. She creates many kinds of innovative glass tile, including a tile series made up of "either a graphic representation of whatever the client is into, or just a large graphic design element," she says. "I also do custom design mosaics, in which I can implant custom glass tile elements like a fiber-optically backlit glass fish."

San Antonio's Dunis Studios makes decorative fused glass tile with a metallic quality, called dichroic. Photos don't do the tile justice; their colors are not flat but instead dimensional, multi-faceted and downright opalescent in nature, said company co-founder Sienna Dunis Ginn.

Dunis recently teamed up with the Hershey Hotel, affiliated with the famed chocolate maker. “We did the Cupcake Room in the Hershey Hotel, actually designing glass tile to emulate the sprinkles on the top of a cupcake,” said Ginn. “We used browns for the chocolate, and pinks, whites and greens for the icing.”

Greater selection is one factor making glass more popular. “There’s a lot available,” says Amanda Casserly, marketing associate with Ashland, Oregon-based Hakatai Enterprises, an importer and distributor specializing in glass tile. “There are so many different sizes, colors, so many different things out there . . . And there’s a lot of Internet reselling by people who buy products from us and others and resell those products on the Internet.”

A PROFITABLE CUSTOM OPTION

Glass tile works well and looks great beside other materials. “You can use glass tile with so many materials,” Casserly says. “It looks good with oak cabinets, it looks good with stainless steel appliances. It works well in both modern and in traditional decorating schemes.”

Casserly agrees that glass allows manufacturers and artisans to get “a little daring.” That’s why Hakatai’s website features custom-blend and custom-gradient tools, letting Internet users visit the website and choose from colors to create their own blends. They can also create their own gradients, Casserly says.

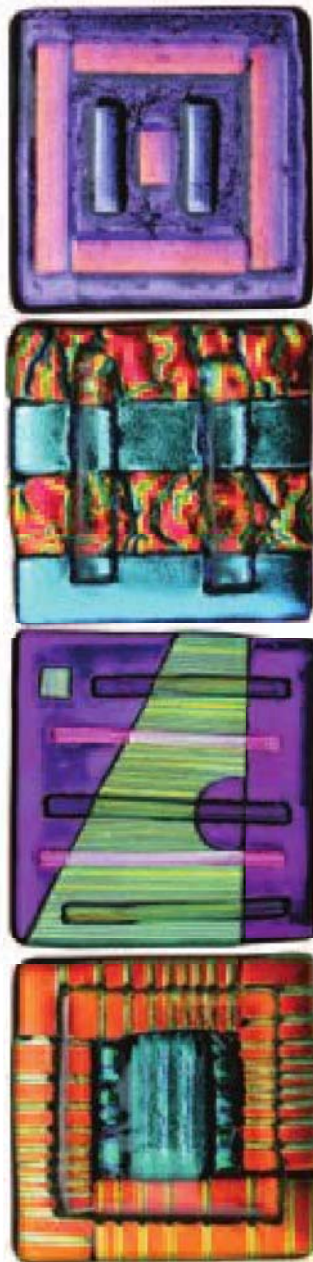
Dealers can also use these custom-color and custom-gradient features without using Hakatai’s brand name. “They can create a blind PDF that shows the contents of the blend, but not let on that they’re using our website,” she says.

Glass isn’t without its corresponding costs. Glass tile is more expensive, Cashman acknowledges. But customers are willing to pay a premium for the unique qualities they find in glass. And that’s just what they’ve been doing recently. “It amazes me that in this economy, my most expensive products are selling, and selling in quantity,” Cashman says.

O’Connor believes tile dealers and distributors should be more receptive to custom design tile, despite it being anything but low end. Though she deals with “a certain core set of stores,” she works more effectively with designers and decorators who understand her work is a resource for their businesses. “A lot of tile stores don’t want to be bothered with the idea of specialty-made merchandise,” she says. “But they’re missing the boat; they could be making a lot of money. My base price is so affordable.”

A GOOD MIXER WITH OTHER MATERIALS

“Most of what we sell is mixed glass-and-stone decorative tiles,” said John Zolman, sales and marketing manager of South Bend-based Miles Distributors, a 41-year-old, family-owned



Photos courtesy of Dunis Studios

ceramic tile and natural stone distributor that sells to flooring retailers and tile installers at six locations in Michigan, Indiana and Kentucky. These range from four-by-four tiles to 12-by-12 sheets of mosaics.

“There’s definitely a demand,” Zolman adds, noting that 75 to 80 percent of requests in his company’s showroom are for glass and glass-and-stone mixes.

“The color palette in glass is almost anything you can think of. And these decorative mosaics can make any natural stone or ceramic tile pop.” The mixed glass-and-stone pieces are used most often as accents or borders with ceramic tile or natural stone, Zolman adds.

Backsplashes are another area for the glass-and-stone mixes. “I think that’s because they can pull in so many colors,” he says. “It’s that and also the fact that it can look like different colors, depending on the direction of lighting.”

Mixed glass-and-stone mosaics are also top sellers at Vasquez Enterprises, a Tempe, Ariz. firm selling wholesale to the trade and distributing within Arizona.

“I think they sell best because the glass-and-stone combination set off porcelain tile better than glass alone,” says president Barbara Vasquez, adding they are also popularly used in full-wall glass shower walls, on floors and in listello applications.

Moreover, even in a slow housing market for buying and selling, homeowners continue to take on remodeling projects that benefit from mixed glass-and-stone mosaics. “Right now, in the marketplace all over this area of California, Nevada and Arizona, people are doing remodels,” Vasquez says. “Because they’re doing remodels, they’re doing backsplashes in their kitchens, shower remodels and bathroom remodels. And that’s lending itself to glass mosaics.”

Consumers are gaining more bang for their buck with the glass mosaics because they can use multiple linear feet from a 12-by-12 mesh. Using that mesh means spending notably less money than they otherwise would, she adds.

Glass-and-stone mosaics are also big sellers at Montgomery, Ala.-based Robert F. Henry Tile Co. President Rob Henry feels mixed mosaics have caught on with the public because people believe a solid wall of glass is just kind of overdoing it. “It gives you the translucence and the color of the glass, and also the natural and in some cases rustic aspects of the stone,” he says. “It gives you a nice blend that’s versatile. There’s even one mosaic that combines glass, stone and metal.”

As for country of origin, China is among top suppliers. “We’re sourcing from domestic suppliers who are importing from Italy and China,” Zolman says. “In talking with the vendors with whom I’m working, much [of the demand for Chinese products] comes down to price. Chinese manufacturers are pretty good about meeting requests of the vendors for specific looks.”

Hakatai also imports glass tile from China to its Ashland, Ore. stocking facility. Casserly reports that dealing closely with