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MOSAIC MADNESS

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Only the bold embrace glass tiles for more than an accent strip in a bathroom or kitchen, and installing a mosaic can often be tricky.



KATE THORNTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By STEVEN KURUTZ

"If I could, I would tile the world," Gerry Eisenberg said. "Because I think it is the most wonderful medium."

Ms. Eisenberg has not yet paved the streets in one-by-one-inch squares. But last summer, she did install a large mosaic in her master bathroom. Spidery tree branches rendered in stone tile are accented with 24-karat gold glass pieces incorporated in the form of delicate leaves. The mosaic design, executed by the company New Ravenna, takes up the entire shower wall, with a unifying ribbon of leaves encircling the room.

After renovating her historic 1920 house in Aiken, S.C., Ms. Eisenberg saved the bath project to do in a special way. "What is more wonderful than mosaic? What is more traditional?" she said. "But mosaic with gold glass to give it that modern zip."

Tile mosaics, often associated with churches and the Roman Empire, are hardly modern. But with the current maxi-

malist insurgency in the design world, with the entirely welcome return of color and pattern and idiosyncratic interiors, elaborate tile installations may soon follow wallpaper as an old-fashioned adornment updated and rediscovered.

"In these handcrafted mosaics, you get pattern on pattern on pattern," said Cean Irminger, creative director for the Virginia-based New Ravenna, which recently unveiled a new collection of designs, including "Mod Palm," a tropical motif that blends glass and matte glass. "It can be super intricate and detailed."

Kim Wozniak, who runs WitsEnd Mosaic, an online tile store that sells to both artists and homeowners, said glass tile is surprisingly adaptable. "Everybody thinks of this old Byzantine style," she said. "But it can really be anything you want it to be" — or go anywhere, not just in bathrooms and kitchens. "Foyers, for example. You can do it like a rug, but it's inlaid in the floor."

Eran Chen, the founder and executive di-

rector of the architectural firm ODA New York, is a fan of glass tile because it is "a true material."

He explained: "It has a combination of playfulness, color, light, but it's still a natural material. That's rare."

In the last decade, Mr. Chen said, glass tile has become more affordable and also more creative, with computer programs that allow for the transfer of an image — a favorite postcard, a painting, a photo of your cat — into a custom mosaic.

"It's personalizing your space in a daring way," said Mr. Chen, who thinks that aspect will appeal especially to millennials for whom individuality is everything. "Minimalism sometimes makes it more difficult to tell personal stories."

One daring personalization through glass can be found in the Manhattan apartment of Babak Hakakian, a partner in Ddc, the high-end contemporary furniture company. Mr. Hakakian hired Mr. Chen to design the loft space, and together they covered the walls

The master bathroom of Gerry Eisenberg in Aiken, S.C. The tree branches are rendered in stone tile and accented with 24-karat gold glass pieces incorporated in the form of delicate leaves. The tile installer lived in Ms. Eisenberg's guesthouse for seven weeks while the mosaic was being done.

of a powder room in bright red glass — "Massimo Vignelli red," as Mr. Hakakian called it.

Mr. Hakakian selected glass from the venerable Italian company Bisazza because, he said, it's harder to achieve real true colors with stone tile, and because he knew the firm's high-end, artisanal tile would wow guests.

The project wasn't cheap. Though Mr. Hakakian received a trade discount, the glass tile he used costs \$84 a square foot, far more than the \$5 to \$15 price of more basic stone tile. (Bisazza's glass mosaics, meanwhile, can cost from \$20 to \$550 a square foot, before installation.) But describing the effect, Mr. Hakakian said: "It's all the things red is — it's energizing, vital, fun, lively. It's really sexy."

A representative of New Ravenna said homeowners who use the company's tiles can expect to spend from \$300 to more than \$1,000 a square foot for a patterned installation, depending on the intricacy of the de-



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sign and the specific tiles selected. As one might expect, 24-karat gold glass will send a budget skyward.

Glass mosaics certainly have the power to stun, especially after two decades of shelter magazine spreads of spare, mid-century modern interiors. To walk into Bisazza's Manhattan showroom is to feel like a visually starved person being treated to a banquet. There are kaleidoscopic mosaics of Renaissance-esque floral bouquets, geometric patterns, the giant face of young Napoleon Bonaparte.

Piero Bisazza, the chief executive, said the 62-year-old company has never wavered in its love of color and pattern. "You do not change your identity because fashion goes one direction or another," he said. "We enjoy decoration, there's no denying it."

Nevertheless, he is finding that fashion is coming to them. "Flower power is very, very strong," Mr. Bisazza said when asked about his most popular designs. "The pendulum is swinging back to rich — not opu-

lent — but rich interiors."

Annie Elliott, an interior designer in Washington, has been trying for years to get clients to embrace glass tiles for more than an accent strip in a bathroom or kitchen. It's an investment not only of money, but also of structure and permanence, she said, and many homeowners are concerned about resale value or a design choice they'll later regret.

"I understand it is a commitment," Ms. Elliott said. "But when a client is bold enough to use glass on a whole wall, the effect is stunning, *stunning*."

Ms. Elliott followed her own advice. Inspired by Gracie, the firm known for hand-painted chinoiserie wallpaper, she commissioned an artist to create a reverse-painted glass backsplash that is 8 feet wide, runs the length of her kitchen wall and replicates the look and fine detail of Audubon bird illustrations. The art glass, made up of three sections, gives her backsplash wall depth and brightness of color.

"I wasn't nervous about it," Ms. Elliott said. "My only concern was, if I spray Windex, is it going to get in the cracks?" (It doesn't).

Nevertheless, installing a mosaic can often be tricky, and if done incorrectly, ruin the entire design. It's not like buying white subway tile at Home Depot. Many homeowners work with an architect or interior designer to navigate the process.

"We have seen things we have worked months on, beautiful patterns, get ruined because the wrong grout was chosen," said Ms. Irminger of New Ravenna. With intricate mosaics, six different grout colors might be used, almost like a painting on the tile, she said. "Every seam is a visual part of the product. Grout is super important."

It's also essential to account for your walls (are they flat?), a room's exact dimensions (Bisazza consults architectural elevations, plans and drawings) and any features that might interrupt the design. You want the most bang for the buck, pattern-wise.

Top left, a detail in the bathroom of Gerry Eisenberg, bottom left, Top and bottom center, a backsplash by Annie Elliott, an interior designer in Washington. Above right, a powder room in the New York City apartment of Babak Hakakian, by Eran Chen.

You don't want a towel bar or toilet-paper dispenser covering a beautiful motif.

"It's a less glamorous part of the business, but it's a crucial part," Mr. Bisazza said. "It's expensive stuff. You want to make sure that you do it properly."

Bisazza can refer clients to recommended installers, as will most tile showrooms. And a word of warning: for large-scale, intricate mosaics, it isn't a weekend job.

Ms. Eisenberg's tile installer lived in her guesthouse for seven weeks. Together, they laid out the large wall mosaic tiles on the floor like an interlocking puzzle, so she could see the full-scale design and make any changes (she added more gold leaves and some highlights). But like many homeowners who take the risk and pay the cost for a glass-tile mosaic, Ms. Eisenberg is beyond thrilled with the way the bathroom mosaic brings color and light and a sense of artistry into her home.

"Every time I go in there," she said, "it's enchanting."

ABOVE AND TOP: KATE THORNTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE AND TOP: JENN VERRIER