

Malleable

Permanence

Matt and Paul Doolin have spent their lifetimes exploring art and nature – pursuits of beauty reflected in their company, Topanga Art Tile & Design, which thrives by pushing ceramic tile to its artistic and practical potential. From colorful geometric patterns to hand-painted murals and textured, nature-inspired mosaics, the output defines a family business that has undertaken a journey marked by joy, hard work and great creative insight.

By **Matt Doolin & Paul Doolin**

It's often hard to tell exactly when you begin a career as an artist. As children, both of us loved to play with clay – but that's been true of countless other children the world over for untold generations. And it really *was* just fun for us, but now when we look back on those days, we also see that, even then, we'd started on the road to our current calling.

It helped, of course, that we were raised in a family of artists. Both of our parents drew and painted, and our father, James Doolin, was respected in the art world. But it was our mother, Leslie Doolin, who started it all for us professionally when she decided to paint on tile: Eventually we joined her in what was to become Topanga Art Tile & Design (Los Angeles).

As children, we attended scores of art exhibitions and openings with our parents and visited hundreds of galleries. We started out in New York, but when we were still quite young our parents left the city. After a few great years in Australia, we eventually moved to the bohemian enclave of Topanga Canyon, a hub of the Los Angeles art scene.

Given all that background, it's tempting to say there was a certain inevitability to art having an influence on who we would become. By the time we were in college, the die was cast, with one of us (Matt) pursuing an art-and-design degree with a focus on ceramics and the other (Paul) pursuing painting and illustration. It was in this period that we started awakening as artists and pushed our involvement with clay to the next level – both in sculpting and in making tile.

material flexibility

The appeal of working in ceramic tile as an artistic medium is vast.

First, it lasts. In a world characterized by disposability and planned obsolescence and at a time when so many artists trade in ephemeral products and materials, we've found that art-minded clients see tile as a "green solution" and like the thought of owning works that have the potential to exist for generations and even centuries.

Second, tile has kept up with the times. Indeed, although it is a medium root-





ed in the past, it also exists and assumes shapes in the here and now. All it takes is a look at the way the great 20th-Century Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi used tile in Barcelona's *Parque Güell*, for example, to know that it's possible to express yourself in ways that nobody ever has before. His inspiration, in fact, convinces us that ceramic tile has no creative boundaries whatsoever and has a significant, growing future in both practical and aesthetic terms.

Third, tile is extremely flexible. Although it's not that easy to work with, it's a medium that imposes very few practical limitations on what can be achieved. Flat in profile or textured with dramatic reliefs, sculptural or architectural, subdued or dramatic, it can be used to craft abstract images, geometric patterns or naturalistic representations of plants and animals as well as historical images.

Moreover, tile compositions can be very small and serve as no more than subtle accents, or they can cover vast surfaces and define entire spaces. They appear in utilitarian settings (such as bathrooms or kitchens), or they can dominate public plazas or highlight suburban backyards. The material is suited to all environments – and, best of all, works brilliantly with water in a harmony of artistic potential that brings novelty and excitement to any setting.

Its flexibility also makes tile accessible. To be sure, some tile is extremely elaborate and expensive, but it can also be quite affordable for a wide range of clients. To sum it up, ceramic tile is among the most protean of all artistic media, which leaves us who work with it the broadest possible range of opportunities when it comes to applications, project types, design styles and clientele.

On a more personal level, what we like most about tile is that the clay offers us wonderful freedom of illustration. Many of our designs are literally penciled into the surface, letting us work in almost limitless levels of detail. We can also make molds that allow us to replicate key looks, and those molds can come from just about anywhere, including illustrations we capture in vivid colors, varied depths and amazing textures. And when something isn't right, we can erase and reuse the material to try again – a wonderful combination of a forgiving medium that produces the most durable of end products.

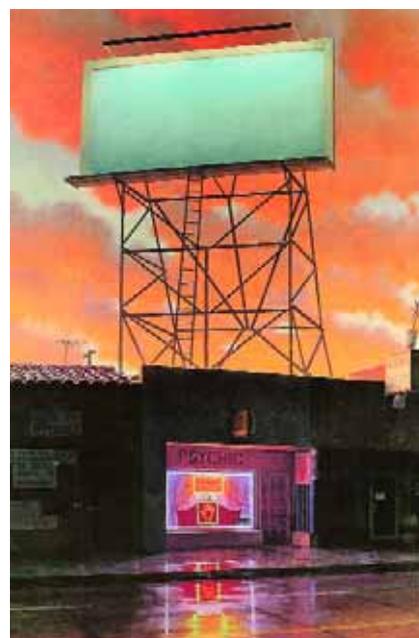
Indeed, tile resists wear and tear like no other material and won't oxidize like metal, wear away like wood or erode like stone: You basically have to take a hammer and chisel to it to destroy it, and even then the shards and pieces can be used in any number of ways. As such, tile holds its value through time – and that's something more and more

of our clients seem to appreciate.

One other key phenomenon with ceramic art is that it's something many people have tried, whether at summer camp or in high school ceramics classes or as a serious hobby. What this accomplishes, we think, is making ceramics – and particularly ceramic tile – something people relate to immediately and strongly.

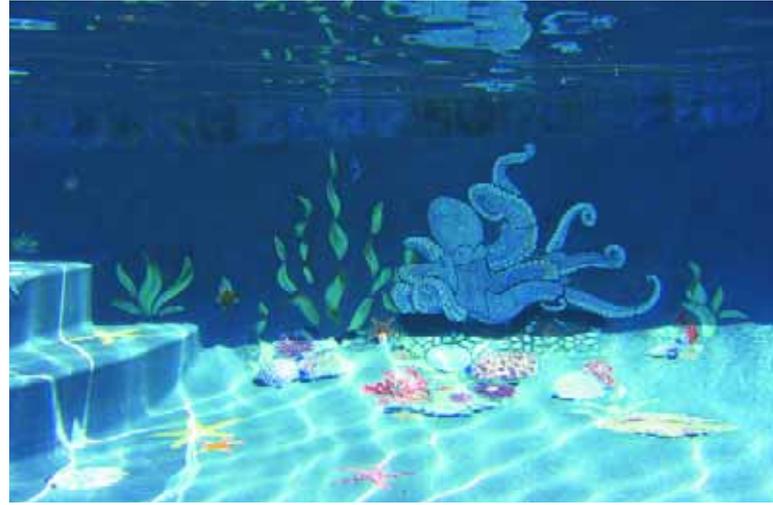
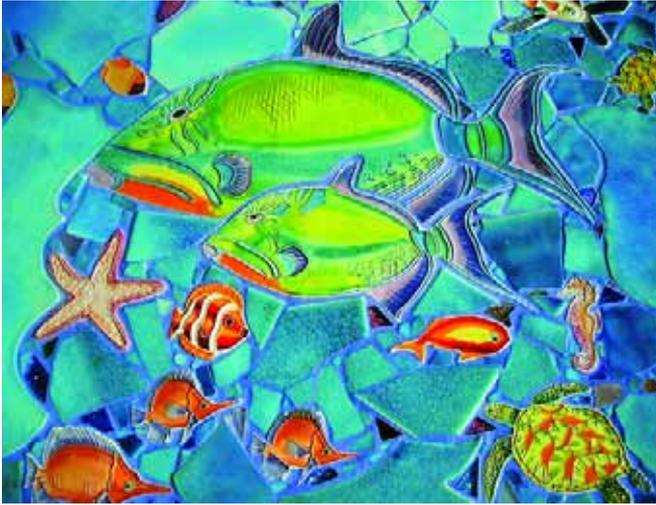
into the now

In our case, we started playing with the material at an early age and just stuck with it. We never lost interest because we kept finding and exploring new ways of working with the material and encompassing ever-expanding forms in



We come by our artistic sensibilities honestly: Our father, James Doolin, is an accomplished painter, while our mother, Leslie Doolin, was the first among us to work with tile as an artistic medium – as seen here in a shower mural done up in a prehistoric theme.





Tile has always been a natural medium for capturing aquatic themes, and we've done our part by offering glimpses of underwater life in our work. Along the way, however, we've portrayed some creatures not commonly seen in ceramic form, including octopi and leopard sharks.

which to make it available to our clients.

The business started in 1978 after a tremendous response to a shower mural our mother did as an art project in her garage studio. It was then that we realized we could make a living doing this kind of art. At first, we sold various conventional types of ceramic tile and worked in traditional designs, but even then, we knew we wanted to push the boundaries of creativity and blaze our own trails when it came to the variety of images we could provide.

Back in those days, however, the entire tile genre was far more limited with respect to what consumers wanted and what tile suppliers were willing to provide.

In the past 15 years or so, thank goodness, that situation has changed dramatically: We've seen a steady expansion of the spectrum of products in the marketplace and how creative consumers have become in their thinking about how various materials can be used.

What's always impressed us is our clients' willingness to combine materials in new ways, asking us to pair our tiles with stone, glass tile, plaster and concrete or even install freeform tile compositions on walls with our own painted mural backgrounds. We've also seen an explosion of interest in large-scale mosaics and tile patterns – daring, highly creative requests all made possible by aggressively

open-minded consumers.

When we first started in the business, most of our tiles went into bathrooms or kitchens or ran in strips at the waterlines of pools. There were occasional murals and all-tile fountains here and there, but those were rare. Now, by contrast, we see elaborate ceramic tile compositions used as major architectural elements inside and outside homes and commercial properties. And we've really seen a boom in demand for tile with three-dimensional reliefs – to the point where sculptural objects actually seem to be growing and emerging from tile surfaces.

Through the years, we've responded

to consumers by developing our own approaches and styles and have created numerous projects marked by bold colors and dramatic imagery. We're also happy to say that we're not alone in our explorations; indeed, there are several other players in the field who are just as determined as we are to push the envelope and build a following for what they offer. We're all lucky to be active at a time when creative boundaries are constantly expanding and there are clients out there who apparently like what we're all doing.

Of course, the freewheeling nature of this marketplace has its challenges, leaving us to face the fundamental questions that haunt anyone who works at or near the leading edge: Given limitless possibilities, what do we pursue? How do we focus? What will keep us going into the future?

seeing the world

Happily for us, we've always been ready to pursue the answers to those questions. Through the years, we've delved extensively into a variety of motifs and subjects that reach far beyond the tiles that were most popular among our clients. In fact, we have been constantly restless, focusing a lot of our energy on bringing possibilities to our clients' attention that they probably never would have considered. For us, this is where much of the fun has always been.

Going back to our childhoods for a moment, all artists are products of their influences to one degree or another, and we're no exceptions.

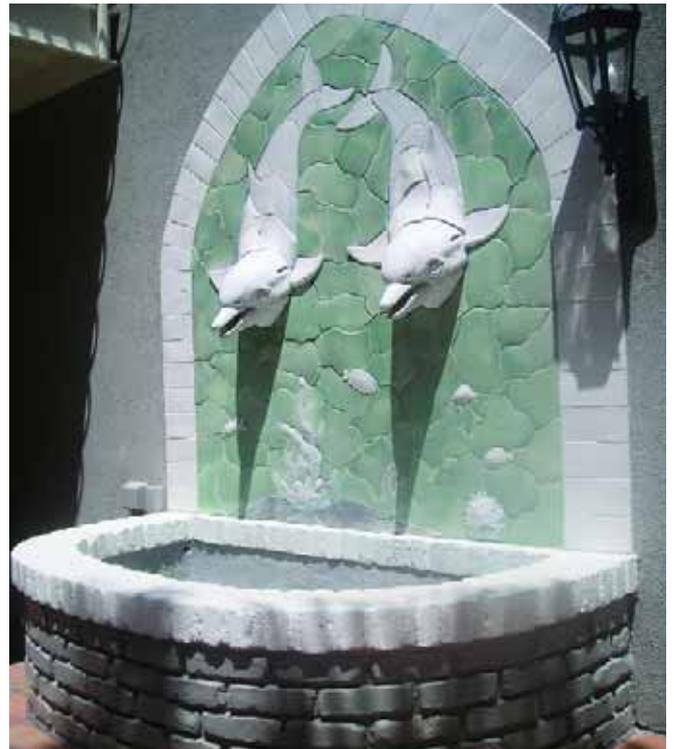
Our mother is Australian, and when we were kids, we had the amazing privilege of snorkeling through the Great Barrier Reef. It was a mind-boggling experience: The fish, the coral, the aquatic plants, the weird sea creatures – all of it was overwhelming and has shaped our sense of what nature is all about. And there's *nothing* like being a child and swimming up to a clam large enough that you could climb inside, if you dared.

For us, this was a wonderful experience that eventually became valuable as well, because the notion of creating aquatic-themed murals and mosaics fit perfectly with the expansion of thinking about tile art in waterfeatures, particularly in the custom pool market.

In fact, the idea of representing elaborate underwater environments in pools and other bodies of water has caught on with many types of clients through the past two decades. Certainly, there's nothing new to the idea of placing images of fish, tur-

Tile's ability to convey vivid colors and tactile and dimensional texture has always been something we've exploited in our mosaics. It gives us the opportunity to present large images across sometimes broad areas while simultaneously allowing us to pay attention to tiny details that reward those who come near to take closer looks.





As far as we're concerned, the glory of tile is that it needn't be confined to conventional surfaces or planes – a lesson we learned in part from the great Antoni Gaudi. We often find ourselves tiling urns, for example, and have even more fun when we break out of two-dimensional representation and drape tile across surfaces in unexpectedly 'active' ways.

tles, shellfish or frogs in aquatic settings, but what *is* new is the attention now being paid to the quality of that imagery as well as the detailing, texture, color and realism.

We now devote countless hours to making these aquatic scenes and images as lively and real as the memories our well-travelled clients have carried away from coral reefs and tide pools. Along the way, we've found that the more realistic we get, the greater the response. And we also delight in creating permanent mosaic dioramas of underwater scenes that many clients may have never seen other than on television or in magazines, giving them immediate access in their daily lives to something few have ever seen in person.

We believe that these illusions work because they bring joy. The tile images add dimension, complexity and interest to oth-

erwise conventional aquatic settings, and kids can't resist diving down to touch the fish and get a better look at the art. It's a whole new level of perception and a major new source of pleasure both above and below the waterline.

In other words, it's all just plain fun – and soothing as well.

And it's not just about the oceans, fish and coral: We also work extensively with floral and botanical images, birds and other animals – not to mention rainforests and other landscapes. We also create abstract patterns, geometric designs and historical images as well as architectural forms. All in all, we know that wherever these journeys take us, water is the steady-est of all common denominators. That's why, although not in the conventional sense, we've always thought of ourselves on some level as being watershapers.

give and take

As we've always seen it, the more we do, the broader our spectrum of options grows because ceramic tile can always be reproduced or altered to meet the needs of a new client and of any number of specific applications.

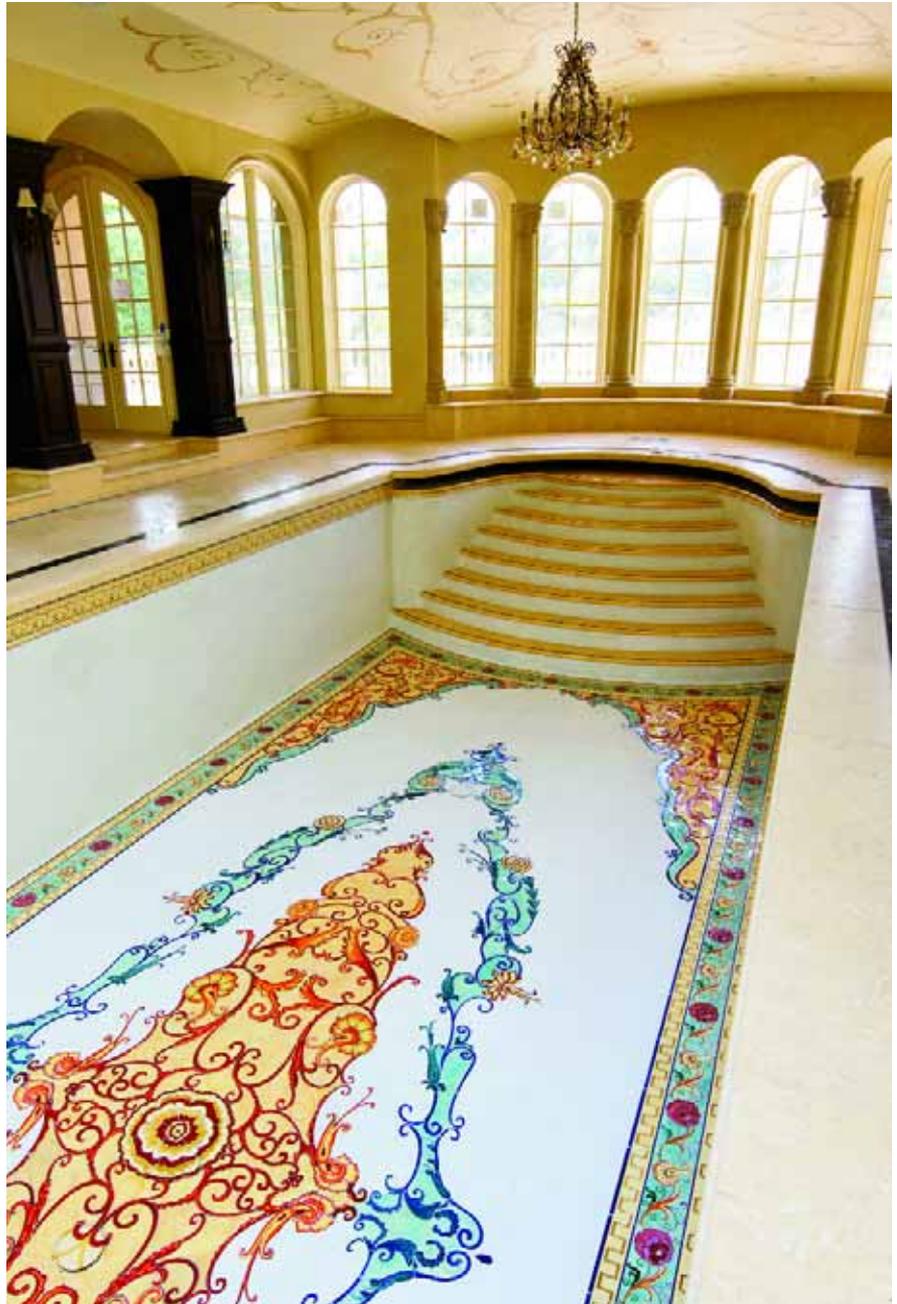
Obviously, we're engaged in running a business, so we're always tempering our own creative impulses with the needs of our clients. Some will want something they've seen installed, but often they will want a variation on an established theme – something that will make a composition distinctively *theirs*. Others will want something entirely original or unique. In all cases, we respond to their ideas and apply what we have done in the past (or develop as we move along) to meet their needs.

There can be a wonderful give and take as we light the creative fires, walk down paths either familiar or fresh and discover exactly what it is our clients desire. In some cases, the results might not be entirely to our tastes, but even these experiences are broadening for us as we move along trails we might not otherwise have followed.

All of this is amplified when we work in public or commercial contexts, basically because we usually end up working with committees and broad sets of ideas and expectations rather than with individuals. Despite such challenges, we enjoy these projects a great deal because they give us the chance to generate compositions that will be seen and used as destinations by people of all walks of life. These are the “galleries” in which we strive to be seen, and the people are patrons whose days we seek to enliven.

In other words, we know we've been fortunate through our careers to have come to a point where our creative expressions work on so many different levels in so many different settings. This work is inextricably bound up with the history of the ceramic arts and will survive us well into the future, and we see no limits in what we can do or in ideas we can explore.

Best of all (and as we frequently remind ourselves), this started when we were small children playing with clay. As it's grown as a medium, we've grown – and it's *still* fun, now more than ever.



For us (and, we trust, our clients), our work in ceramic tile is often about finding joy in illusions that surprise and delight, whether it's a chance encounter with a leopard shark or starfish while swimming – or entering a grand room and seeing a magic carpet at the bottom of a pool. If that's not fun, then what is?

