

Tiling a Backsplash

Decorative tiles liven up a kitchen

by Tom Meehan

Years ago, ceramic tile served as a basic material for wall and floor covering. Decorative tiles—handmade, handpainted European tiles, for instance—were rare. Today our basic needs are met with vinyl flooring, fiberglass tub surrounds and other synthetic materials that are less expensive and easier to install than tile. But there's been a strong revival of interest in ceramics, and I think this is because tile offers decorative possibilities that other materials just can't match.

One of the biggest trends seems to be toward the use of tile in the kitchen (chiefly for floors and backsplashes). It has become common to

have a plastic laminate or synthetic solid countertop set off by a fully tiled backsplash. In a recent project I did for Lane DeCamp and Alice Korach, I installed a Dutch tile backsplash in the remodeled kitchen of their 200-year-old Connecticut home (photo below). It was a job that combined basic setting techniques with advanced layout techniques.

Dutch tiles—Lane and Alice chose Royal Makum Dutch tile (imported to the U. S. by Country Floors, 15 East 16th St., New York, N. Y. 10003-3104; 212-627-8300). This tile is packed by hand into wooden frames before firing,

which creates a unique tile whose unevenness enhances its old-world look. Local artists paint many of the tiles with scenes of the countryside, children playing, flowers, ships and windmills.

The body of this tile is relatively soft and easy to cut. Still, I used a wet saw: the tile has a tendency to break unevenly if cut on a snap cutter. Because it's expensive, we ordered very close to what we actually needed, rather than the normal 5% to 7% extra.

Surface preparation and layout—This job was part of a remodel, so we glued and screwed new drywall over plaster walls that



Backsplash art. The completed kitchen (photo above) features imported Dutch tiles. A backsplash isn't subjected much to water, so it's fairly simple to tile. Meehan used an all-purpose mastic, applied with a 1/8-in. notched trowel, to install the tiles (photo left). The setting time of the mastic was slow enough that he was able to spread an entire section before placing any tiles. Shortly after finishing this section of backsplash (photo right), the owner announced that he wanted the border tiles to turn up along the window casing. Fortunately, Meehan was able to make the change.



had been cut up to update the electrical wiring. We taped the joints and applied one coat of joint compound. The wall was intact above the window over the kitchen sink, so we simply scraped off the loose paint to establish a solid bonding surface.

Before we could start installing the tile, we had to consider the layout of the three walls that were to be tiled (drawings below). On a complicated job like this, careful layout would be the key to success. We were using plain, off-white 5-in. field tile surrounded by 2½-in. by 5-in. border tiles painted with acanthus leaves. There were also seven individual decorative tiles—painted with scenes—to be spaced evenly about the kitchen, as well as two 4-tile murals of flower vases. Over the stove, there was to be an even larger mural—12 tiles—of flowers in a vase. Finally, there was a tile plaque of a birdcage, roughly 8 in. by 10 in., to be scribed into the field tiles above the window at the sink.

The layout of the first wall (top drawing) was determined by the placement of the 2½-in. square corner piece. This tile makes the transition between the horizontal row of border tiles running along the countertop and border tiles running vertically up to the wall cabinets. When it came time to tile this wall, I'd already used up the corner tiles I had, so I mitered two border pieces to serve as a place holder (top left photo, facing page).

The sections of backsplash on either side of the sink window (middle drawing) were easy to lay out. Because the window is the visual center of the kitchen, I wanted a full tile on either side; any necessary cutting would end up in the corners. Three individual decorative tiles would go to the left of the sink, and one more would go on the right along with one of the 4-tile murals.

Over the window, I centered the birdcage right to left, but top to bottom was a different story. For aesthetic reasons, I wanted a full tile on top of the window casing to present the birdcage as cleanly as possible. This left two thirds of a tile cut into the ceiling, which happened to match the side pieces, anyway.

On the wall behind the stove (bottom drawing), I made a judgment call. The stove and the cabinet above it were off center from each other by about 1 in., so I had to decide whether to center the 12-tile mural on the cabinet or on the stove. I centered it over the stove (bottom left photo, facing page) because I felt it had a stronger visual connection to the tilework.

As we planned the location of the decorative tiles, we kept in mind what would be seen first upon entering the kitchen, and then what would be seen most frequently. It was also important to know where the small appliances (blender, toaster, etc.) would be located to avoid blocking the decorative tiles from view.

Installation basics—Because these tiles were handmolded, they were uneven in thickness. That's why I used a ¼-in. notched trowel to spread the mastic on the walls. (I used mastic rather than thinset because it's easier to work

with and is perfectly adequate for installations that aren't subjected to water.) This trowel delivered enough mastic to fill out the irregularities of the tile. The relatively thick layer of mastic also set up more slowly, so I was able to move the tiles around freely. I used an all-purpose mastic called Elastomulti-21 (Boiard Products Corp., 453 Main St., Little Falls, N. J. 07424; 800-352-8668). There is very little slippage with this product, which enabled me to set the tiles without using spacers to hold them in place. It set slowly enough that I was able to spread mastic over a whole section of backsplash before setting any tile (bottom left photo, preceding page). In general, I spread only as much mastic as I can cover in 25 or 30 minutes.

The Dutch tiles also vary considerably in dimension, which means it's impossible to keep a uniform grout joint—but then again, that's the beauty of the tile. I gauged the grout joints totally by eye, maintaining roughly a ¼-in. joint with ⅛-in. variance either way.

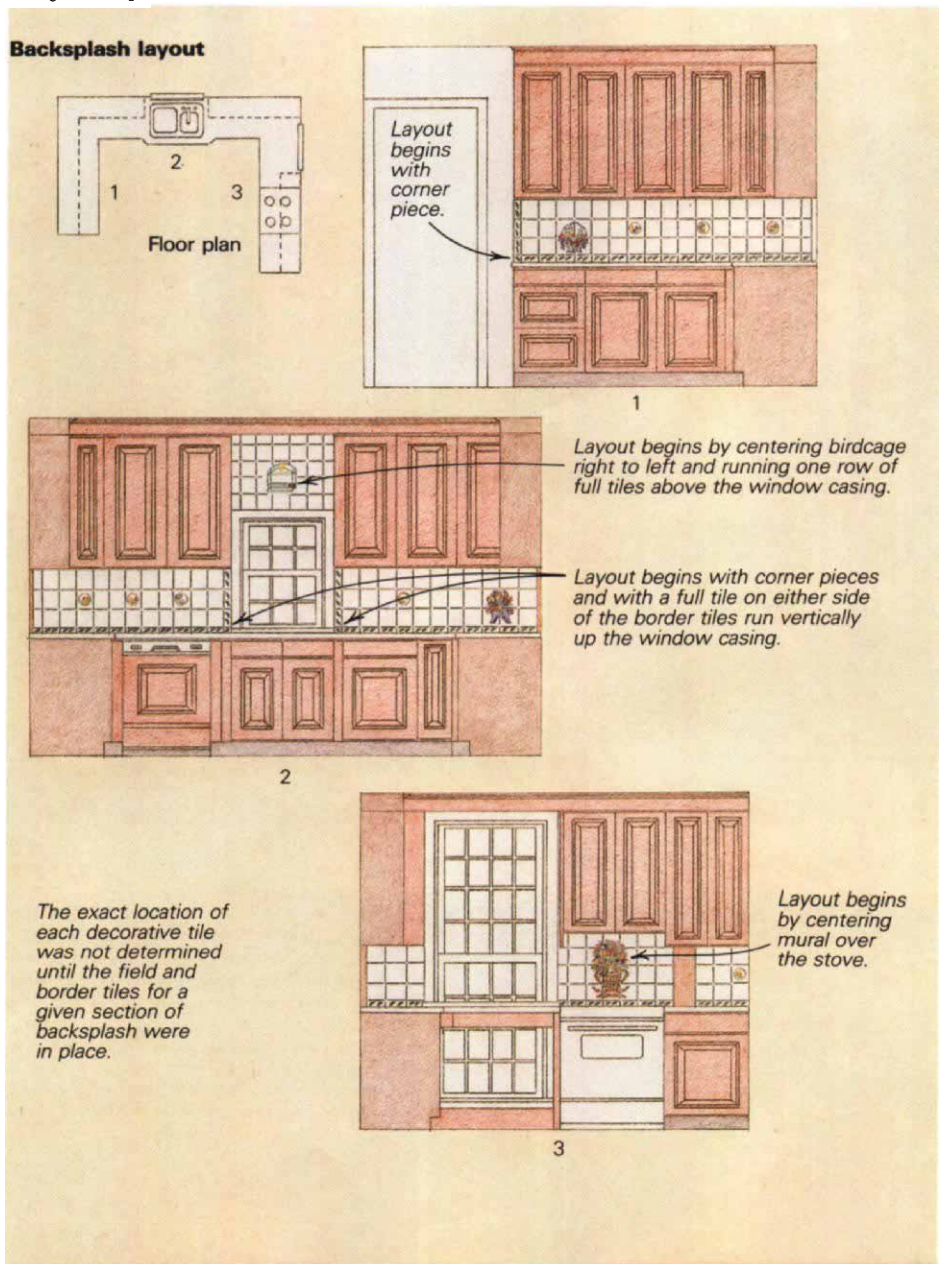
I started by laying border tiles just along the counter, and then continued with full field

tiles above that until I reached the bottom of the cabinets (bottom right photo, preceding page). As with most backsplashes, I did not use a level because my tile was only four or five courses high. Regardless of whether or not the cabinets and counter are perfectly level, the job looks best if the tiles follow them.

I really hit only one snag on this job. After I had just finished laying the field tiles on both sides of the window at the sink, Lane came in and decided that he wanted the border tiles, which I had run only along the bottom, to turn up along both sides of the window trim. Thanks to the help from my associate Rick Filep, and to the slow setting time of the mastic, we were able to slide over all the field tiles 2½ in. without any major problems. We then cleaned off the excess mastic before it had a chance to set up on the tiles.

Setting the fancy tiles—Installing the murals and the individual decorative tiles was basically the same as installing the field tile. The only challenge was in determining exactly where to place them. Because the mastic I use

Drawings: Karen Negri



is slow to set, I set all the field tiles in a given section of the backsplash. Then I stood back with Lane, and we considered where the decorative tiles should go. Once we'd made a decision, I removed the necessary field tile by prying it out with the trowel and replaced it with the decorative tile.

The birdcage plaque, on the other hand, required skill and patience. The first thing I did was to lay out on the counter all the field tiles necessary to fill the space above the window. Then I positioned the plaque on top of the tiles and traced its outline onto the field tile below (top right photo). I held the pen at an angle to allow for the grout joint around the tile.

At first I tried to cut all the ins, outs and curves with the wet saw. But the spray from the machine washed off the ink marks, and the machine was not accurate enough on the curves. I remembered a similar project I'd done using tile nippers and decided to employ that tool here. Having a soft clay body, the tile offered little resistance as I whittled away at it with the nippers (bottom right photo). I cleaned up the cut edges with a Carborundum stone.

With all the cutting complete, I installed the field tiles, leaving a birdcage-shaped hole in the middle of them. Then I buttered the back of the plaque with extra mastic to allow the plaque to protrude about an 1/8 in. beyond the field tile. This protrusion made the birdcage (which had a beveled edge) look real. Because of its size and weight, this was the only tile that required spacers—two pieces of folded cardboard—to hold it in place until the mastic set.

Grouting—I went back the next day to grout the job. I wanted the color of the grout to blend well with the field tile. This way the uneven grout lines, while still contributing to the old-world charm, would be less obtrusive. There wasn't a premixed grout that would give me the color I wanted so I had to mix my own.

With the grout joints being as wide as they were, I had to use a floor grout. Any grout joint over 1/8 in. wide, should have a sand base (which makes it a floor grout). I mixed one part light portland cement to ten parts white floor grout to get the color I wanted. Although

I don't believe it's called for in every situation, a liquid latex grout additive was useful in this case. Because these were porous tiles, they could draw moisture out of the grout and weaken it. The latex additive reduced this.

The grouting itself was slow, but not too complicated. The tile still absorbed the moisture of the grout fairly quickly, which meant that I had to grout small sections at a time. When cleaning the grout from the tile, it was important to move the sponge diagonally across the tiles so as not to rake grout from the joints. Ten minutes later, I wiped the tile down with an old towel to polish it up, and the job was done...almost.

Keeping in mind that lighter grouts will stain, especially where the tile backs up to a cooktop, I went back two weeks later to apply a coat of grout sealer to the joints of all the tiled areas. It may not be 100% insurance against staining, but it will be a considerable help. □

Tom Meehan is a second-generation tilesetter and owner of Westport Tile & Design in Westport, Connecticut. Photos by Kevin Ireton.

Meehan made the mitered corner tile in the lower lefthand corner because he didn't have enough manufactured corner tiles. The mitered pieces served for layout purposes and were later replaced.

After laying out the necessary field tiles on the counter, Meehan centered the birdcage and traced around it, holding the pen at a slight angle to allow space for a grout joint.



The stove and the cabinet above it were off center from each other by 1 inch, so Meehan elected to center the 12-tile mural on the stove because it seemed to have a stronger visual connection to the tilework.

Meehan tried to cut out the intricate shapes on his wet saw, but the water kept washing off his cut lines. Then he discovered that the relatively soft tiles were easy to cut with his nippers.

