

Backfill

Custom Tile by Number



When artist-renovator Doug Hopkins arrived at the kitchen and bath phase of his first remodeling project, he decided to make his own decorative tiles for the showers, baths, kitchen counters, and wood-stove surrounds. It turned out to be a career-altering decision: Years later, he's still hand-making, hand-glazing, and kiln-firing custom tiles, both for projects of his own and for contractors in his local market around Bloomsburg, Pa.

"I'm actually kind of tired of the tiles," he confides. "I'd rather be doing stained glass and painting and sculpture. But people keep asking for tile, and it helps pay the bills."

Each run of subway tile-sized individual tiles starts as an image carved freehand onto a piece of dried clay. That positive form is coated with a release agent and used to make a corresponding negative, which is fired in a kiln. Hopkins then packs the completed negative form with wet clay, slices off any excess material, and tips out the resulting tile. After an initial firing, the tile is hand-colored with glaze and then fired a second time.

The custom tiles are set the same way as conventional ceramic tiles. To ensure that the final mosaic — which typically features a vining-plant motif — goes together in the right order, Hopkins numbers the pieces on the back and provides the contractor with a paper key.

But when he's carving the originals, he says, he starts with no plan in mind. "Each tile just grows out of the last one," he says, "just the way the plant would grow." — *Ted Cushman*

To form a tile, Hopkins packs raw clay into a custom mold and compacts it with a press, then slices off any excess with a wire frame knife (above). After the raw tile has dried, he pulls it from the mold (right).



Hopkins provides installers with a paper-and-pencil guidance drawing (above), but he carves the tiles freehand without any plan. Of the finished mosaic (right) he says, "It just grows out of my head."

