



Ceramic Scene: Michael Kelly, left; Sean McLean, center, and Desmond McLean of California Pottery and Tile Works show samples of their wares.

E-Style Tiles

California Pottery and Tile Works lets designers customize their ceramic works online

By **DEBORAH CROWE**
Staff Reporter

These days, when designer Marsha Wood needs to find a decorative ceramic tile for a Spanish Revival home she is renovating, she doesn't haul out a dusty catalog and hope she can get something close to the look she wants.

Wood instead hops on the Internet, clicks to the Web site of California Pottery and Tile Works and designs the tile herself with the factory's TilePainter software application.

"It gives me the ability to use beautiful traditional designs using more contemporary colors, which I really couldn't do anywhere else," said Wood, owner of Costa Mesa-based Color for Architecture, which also uses the application to give a vintage looks to new buildings. "None of my other vendors has anything like this."

Leveraging technology with the ancient craft of ceramics is one of several innovations that founder Sean McLean and his partners have instituted at the Los Angeles company. That's made it the go-to place for architects, contractors and do-it-yourselfers from Santa Barbara to Orange County who want to refurbish the

kitchen of their Arts and Crafts fixer-upper or add a colorful tiled fountain in a historic downtown plaza.

Thanks to Internet marketing and word-of-mouth among designers, the factory nicknamed CalPot by longtime clients over the past five years has been growing its out-of-state business, competing with smaller U.S. studios and imports from Europe and Latin America.

Because customization is such a key part of the company business model, McLean created TilePainter to enable prospective clients to try out their own designs over the Internet without having to travel to his factory, located in an industrial area south of downtown L.A.

Customers can order sample tiles called strike-offs to see how the design will actually look and save designs to an online account for future use. These kinds of innovations have led to such growth that McLean is searching for larger space in the nearby Vernon area.

"With the commissions we've gotten so far this year, we really need more space," said McLean, noting that his company had \$2.5 million in billings last year, which he expects will double this year based on jobs now under discussion.

Uncommon beginnings

Traditionally, ceramic tile makers enter the business after attending art school or a long apprenticeship with a master ceramicist. But McLean, a native Irishman, is a longtime contractor with a keen sense of a builder's need for large volumes of quality materials on tight construction schedules.

It's that sensibility – along with a love of the beauty and utility of the decorative tiles popular in Southern California homes built in the early 20th century – that prompted McLean and his brother Patrick to open a custom tile business in 1994.

"I saw an opportunity because I'd be doing these jobs and have trouble finding the tile I needed," said McLean, who relies on experienced craftsmen to produce the tiles.

While the finishing of tiles is still done by hand, McLean said he takes advantage of technology and modern work organization techniques to fill volume orders. For example, giant industrial kilns more than 40 years old are supplemented with computerized models that more closely control temperatures for a certain look on intricate decorative tiles.

California Pottery's work can be seen at the Wynn Hotel in Las Vegas, the Malibu home of the singer Cher and downtown Ventura institutions such as the Star Lounge. Among the firm's latest projects is a relief mural at Westlake Village's new California Wellbeing Institute, the brainchild of Dole Food Co. Chief Executive David Murdock.

"They were a godsend when they opened because my other choices would have been somewhere in the Midwest and extremely expensive," said Paul Watchenbach, a Redondo Beach architect who specializes in new custom homes and remodels in the Spanish Revival style. "Or you'd get by with tile from Mexico that was of lesser quality because of the softer clays they'd use and with fewer choices in patterns."

Southern California was a center of tile production in the early 20th century, with the Persian, Spanish and Mayan-influenced Catalina and Malibu styles among the best known today. The famous Malibu Tile Works, which operated in the 1920s and '30s, used a distinctive, long-lasting glazing technique that McLean's finishers still employ.

The design's outline is silk-screened on the bisque tile to keep the colors separate. Painters seated before Lazy Susan-like trays don't paint on the glazes, but rather blob them on with a tool that resembles a bulb syringe.

"Original Malibu tiles still look like new and that's due to the fact that they were manufactured with such integrity," said Dale Walker, a San Pedro contractor and supplier who regularly gets requests from affluent clients to reproduce tiles to replace broken and missing pieces from the 1920s homes they are renovating. "And that's what CalPot still does."

Because lead – which creates a brilliant white – and other toxic chemicals can no longer be used in

glazes, chemists in the factory's research department have to be particularly innovative in matching colors for restoration projects, McLean said. "They have to work some miracles sometimes."

California Pottery & Tile also operates a sister factory in Monterey, Mexico for high-volume jobs and larger, undecorated tiles, but all the design and bulk of the intricate decorative work is done in Los Angeles. Most of his craftspeople are Mexican immigrants, many of them young women from regions known for their own pottery. They are trained by McLean's senior craftsmen.

While Patrick McLean has moved on to other ventures, his brother Desmond eventually took his place. For creative directors, the brothers have had as partners a succession of established artists, the latest being Michael Kelly, a pre-Columbian art specialist who became a partner in 2002.

McLean said Kelly has helped his company transition from a small Spanish tile studio to a more versatile firm offering a greater variety of international influences and original modern designs. Kelly, with an established practice in Ventura County, also gave the McLean brothers access to the large commissions to be had in the ongoing renovation of downtown Ventura and neighboring cities.

Kelly started out as a customer before he joined the firm.

"There are a lot of good ceramic artists out there, but I think the difference between them and us is that we're not afraid to take anything on, even if nobody's done it before," he said. "Plus, we're able to combine the fine art with the high-volume production."

California Pottery and Tile Works

Location: Los Angeles

Founded: 1994

Core Business: Custom ceramic tile and large pottery

Employees in 2006: 50

Employees in 2007: 65

Goal: To further expand its restoration business into new construction projects featuring a high-end historic look

Driving Force: The demand for affordable, high-volume, custom tile work as more property owners renovate historic buildings