

## A Local Revival: Authenticity and Artistry Reign at California Tile and Pottery Works

Posted By [Josh Stephens](#) In [Design](#) | [1 Comment](#)

Los Angeles, like architecture itself, has had an uneasy relationship with the past.

It spent the better part of the 20th century obliterating old styles and replacing ornament with bare walls, 90-degree angles, and exposed structural elements. But much to the chagrin of many Modernists, domestic architecture never abandoned the coziness and aesthetic pleasure that comes from warm colors, substantial materials, local traditions, and handcrafted design.

Those values lie at the heart of California Tile and Pottery Works, a Los Angeles-based designer and manufacturer of custom pottery and tiles that is intent on extending one of Southern California's most distinctive aesthetic traditions into the 21st century.

In the early 20th century well known companies such as Malibu Tile Works, which operated from 1926 to 1932, lent color to nearly every Mission Style, Spanish Revival, and Craftsman building in Southern California. They provided the decoration — floors, fountains, stairways, murals, mosaics, and fireplaces — that complemented the terra cotta and whitewashed that bloomed when California was young.

"It fit right in with the climate, the architecture, the connection with Spain through Mexico," said CPTW co-owner and Vice President Michael Kelly. The California tile industry went into decline in the Depression and thereafter was perpetuated by a handful of artisans who kept the craft alive through the 20th century's more bland decades, when the rich colors of Moorish tiles and fanciful parrots of Catalina murals gave way to the "less is more" aesthetic.

As the latest incarnation of California tile, CPTW creates everything from replacement tiles for tiny Craftsman bathrooms to vast schemes for clients such as the MGM Grand Hotel, the House of Blues, and the Camarillo Library, to unique murals and other details for high-end Spanish Revival estates.

"We were inspired mostly by Malibu Tile Works," said CPTW CEO Sean McLean, whose brother Des is also a co-owner. "For the short time that they were in business, they had a huge impact on tilemaking in America."

But CPTW does not fire mere nostalgia in its kilns, nor does it claim to be a boutique art studio. Its goal is to produce tiles in as high a volume as possible while maintaining the quality that comes from customized, hand-crafted work.

Some seven decades after its initial surge, California-style tile is once again on the rise. Many buildings that were built in the heyday of California tile now need restoration. Many homeowners are seeking replacement tiles with the same level of quality and style as the originals.

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CPTW's tiles on flooring and stairs

"The Spanish revival homes of the 1920s are very much desired by buyers," said Kelly. "They're full of architectural details that people...can't find in a lot of new or later architecture."

Many segments of California never really abandoned the Spanish style, and numerous new high-end homes, hotels, restaurants, churches, and public buildings are borrowing pages from blueprints that are 80 years old. The goal is not necessarily to imitate classic styles out of nostalgia or contrived retro sentiment, but rather to simply continue a long-standing tradition.

Architects are being sought to make new houses that draw on those styles," said Kelly. "There's a new construction market and a restoration market."

Though trends wax and wane, CPTW's work is based on the same materials and techniques that have been used nearly since the invention of pottery. McLean said that a worker from the original Malibu Tile factory could take a seat at a CPTW workbench and need nearly no orientation.

The only major innovation is the use of computers. CPTW artists use Adobe Illustrator and other graphics tools to create designs that are traced on to blank tile and then painted. CPTW also allows customers to design their own tiles via their website, which offers them templates and a wide palate of proprietary colors.

Many of the designs that CPTW turns out are, however, grounded in the public domain and based on styles that reach back hundreds of years. CPTW reinterprets everything from ancient motifs of Celtic, Persian, and Seracan designs to more contemporary Spanish Colonial, Craftsman, old Malibu designs and Catalina styles, as well as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Modern, and, indeed, literally any pattern or image that a client brings in. Regardless of whether a design originated by way of history, hand, or mouse, every tile and pot is cut, painted, and fired by hand.

While mass-production tile companies have turned to overseas factories, CPTW has done all of its manufacturing in a factory in South L.A. since 2000 and recently expanded into an adjacent building. McLean said that remaining true to Southern California confers two crucial advantages: quality control and close relationships with clients.

"It's a custom industry," said Kelly. "So if you're doing five or six radiused archways and it's coming from China or Spain, how are you going to fix it?"

CPTW routinely works with architects, decorators, and clients to come up with designs and then customize them according to the building at hand. CPTW's archives include a nearly infinite number of samples and photographs of vintage and recent work, from which architects and designers derive inspiration. McLean said that the chance to be creative and not just choose a design off a shelf is, for clients, one of the most appealing aspects of CPTW's approach.

"In modern tradition, architects are subject to going to showrooms and distributors and just picking whatever they have on the shelf and trying to make it work," said Kelly. "When they understand that we can do anything they think up, it opens up a Pandora's box of ideas and excitement." CPTW recently reached an agreement to produce tiles and pottery for the new Montage hotel in Beverly Hills — a commission which McLean said could be filled by no other company.

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Partners, Sean and Des McLean

Partners, Sean and Des McLean

“For many years an architect could go to a studio and they would not have the opportunity to build a hotel or a whole house with quick turnaround time,” said McLean. “We have that ability.”

On those larger projects, CPTW walks a line between artistry and mass production. Yet most of CPTW’s work does not take place on such a large scale, and smaller pieces require no less precision and attention to detail. Many murals include custom molding and irregular shapes, which require tiles to be cut and pieced together into arches. CPTW tiles are also used on many courtyard fountains—the trademark of the Mission Revival style—that require designers to navigate odd angles and curved surfaces.

It is, of course, the successful negotiation of irregularity that distinguishes true artistry from mere decoration—and which makes California tile a tradition well worth keeping alive.

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