

# CLAY MASTER

Artisan Brenda Lusher keeps Addison Mizner's legacy alive one tile at a time

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After legendary architect Addison Mizner was forced to close his company when Palm Beach's land boom went bust in the 1920s, he probably never imagined his legacy would be revived eight decades later by a tile artisan. So it goes for Brenda Lusher, founder of Mizner Industries in Fort Lauderdale, a studio and showroom dedicated to the creation of custom, hand-painted ceramic tiles, a practice that became one of the hallmarks of Mizner's work in South Florida.

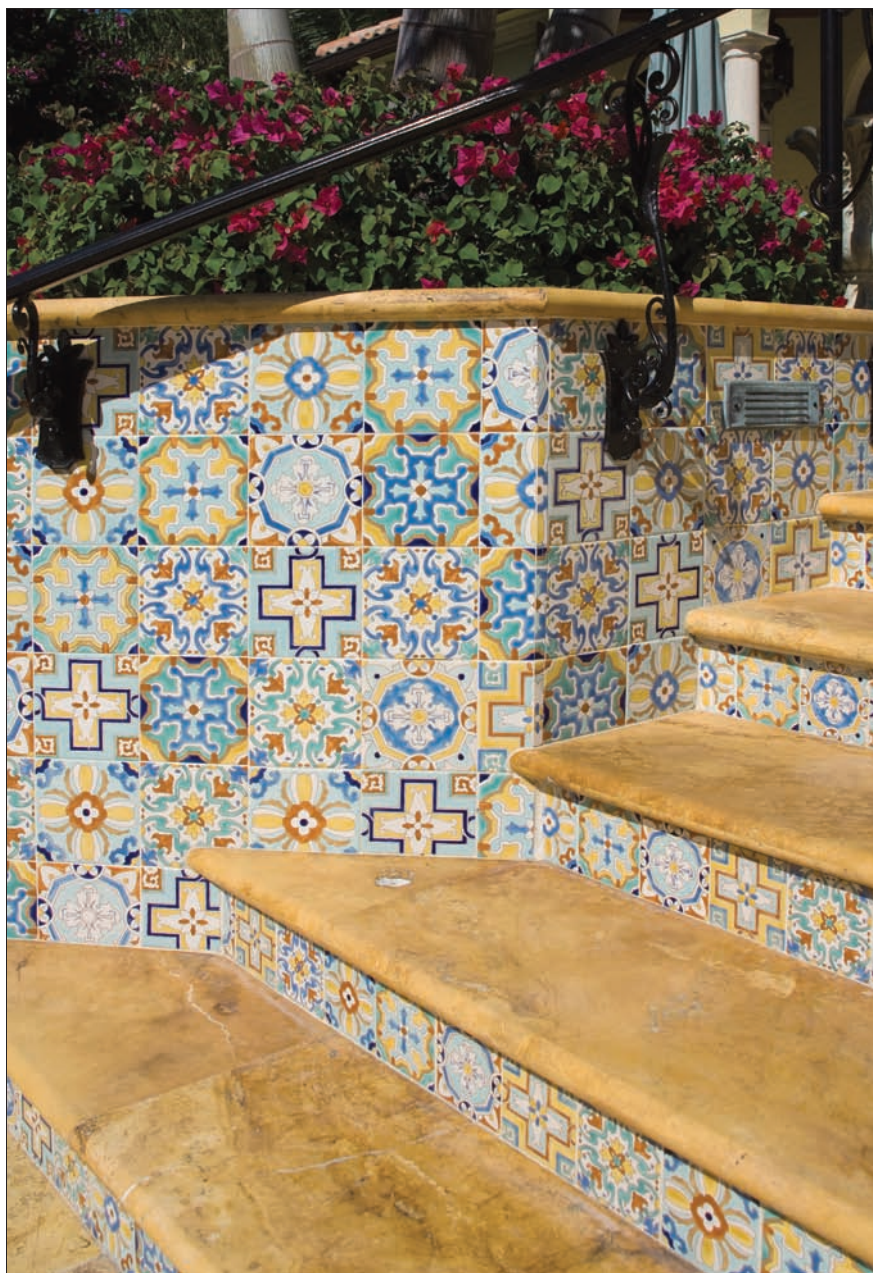
"Mizner was all about quality," says Lusher, "and that matches my style to a tee."

The tile design bug first bit Lusher after meeting a tile factory owner while traveling through Mexico. She bought into the business, but the two parted ways two years later when that company started going in a different direction. Back stateside, Lusher decided to put what she had learned about tile making to use while incorporating the artistic techniques that had brought Mizner such world recognition during his heyday. Lusher acquired the rights to the Mizner Industries name (the exact moniker Mizner himself had used for his company in the 20s) and opened her first Fort Lauderdale studio in 1995. Two and a half years ago she moved to a larger space in the same area of the city that allowed her to add a showroom as well as extra square footage for her team of four full-time artisans.

Lusher's company is a testament to creativity and originality. All of her tiles are hand-painted and therefore one-of-a-kind. Depending on size and complexity of design, the cost ranges from \$18 to \$48 each — figures that are not at all unreasonable when you consider the amount of work that goes into each slab. Lusher begins the process by creating a completely custom design for her clients (a long list of designers, decorators, architects and builders whose work throughout Florida is well known). The chosen design can be based on her own extensive catalogue of patterns from different eras of history or inspired by suggestions from the clients themselves based on something they saw in a painting, in a movie, on a fabric swatch or even a dream. Imagery ranges from abstract swirls and insignias to literal objects and shapes.

Once the design and colors have been selected, the process of creating the tiles begins. It starts with a chunk of clay that's rolled into a flat slab and placed into a press. That slab is then trimmed and allowed to dry for about a week. The tile is then trimmed again and fired inside a kiln. A majolica base is applied and then the design is transferred to the tile before artisans paint it by hand. Once the painting is complete, a clear glaze is applied before the tile is again baked in the kiln to finish the process, the entirety of which is done onsite at Lusher's studio.

Inspiration for new designs comes mainly from Lusher's travels. She regularly visits with tile experts in Europe and elsewhere to study their collections and then reproduces said designs in her lines. "No day is the same and no client is the same," says Lusher. "There are always new designs, new techniques and new places to visit that inspire new tiles." One of Lusher's newest lines for 2008 is heavily influenced by Turkey's culture with motifs that feature vibrant hues of cobalt blue, turquoise, coral red and emerald green. Next up is a Chinese line Lusher hopes to develop and begin executing in time for next year.





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As for where her tiles end up, Lusher says pools, fountains and alfresco settings are the most common backdrops, but in the last year, as color begins to creep back indoors, she's received requests for installations in bathrooms, kitchens, and above fireplaces and inside custom wall niches in living rooms and bedroom suites — in homes as near as Palm Beach and as far as Saudi Arabia. While the majority of Mizner Industries' work is residential, the company's tiles can also be seen in public buildings like Casa Casuarina in Miami Beach, the Vero Beach Hotel and the Everglades Club in Palm Beach.

“I started this business because I felt it was an art that we were going to lose and it grew from that,” says Lusher, who to this date remains one of only a handful of true tile artistry entrepreneurs in the country. “I have no idea what I'd be doing if I wasn't doing this. I love what I do because it's always evolving and changing.” □

Below, from left: Brenda Lusher at her Fort Lauderdale studio and two residential settings featuring her tiles, a fountain and pool. Opposite: A Mizner Industries tile installation on an outdoor garden stairway.

