

Behind the craft

Naomi Jones talks to bespoke tile painter Maggie Mumford in her garden studio at her home in Surrey

How did you become a tile painter?

After studying graphics at Wolverhampton I moved to London and started working for Fired Earth. It was only a temporary job, but people kept asking for decorative tiles, not just the plain ones that were popular at the time. I hadn't done any ceramic painting before, but I bought some overglaze paints, learned all about firing and began to take on commissions. Later, I worked for Chalon for a few years and painted for its customers too, using Fired Earth tiles.

When did you decide to launch a full-time business?

Six years ago. I still make use of my old contacts (and Chalon displays a panel of my tiles in each of its showrooms), but now a small company in Stoke-on-Trent makes all my handmade tiles to my own specifications.

What are you working on at the moment?

A couple of commissions. One of my customers is a seafood lover and wants a selection of individual tiles, featuring crabs, lobsters and prawns. Another customer has sent me some fabric she's used in her kitchen, and has told me tulips are her favourite flowers so I'll use those ideas as inspiration.

Will you paint on paper first?

Yes, mainly to show people what they'll get; with the panels,



I'll sketch the design as a scale drawing so the customer can see what it will look like in the space they have and how many tiles they'll need. When finally working on the tile, I'll fire after each layer of paint, gradually building up the detail with four or five firings.

How did your Can't Wait ranges come about?

I was painting some of my designs, like the Party Cakes, over and over because they were very popular, so I developed these as limited edition hand-decorated ranges using my original watercolours. My illustrations are made into decorations, which I then cut out, soak in water and lay onto a plain tile, squeezing out all the water so that it's completely flat; this method only requires one firing so it's a much quicker process. But even though I'm not painting directly on the tile, each one will be slightly different as no two ever come out of the kiln looking identical.

Which are your favourite designs?

The Can't Wait ranges are great because you can get a lot of detail into watercolour illustrations – I'm currently developing a set with a seaside theme, but the variety in my bespoke work is fantastic. A lady up in Scotland asked for a panel to include her house and all the different parts of her garden. Sitting in my studio with the radio on, studying her photos, painting – it's wonderful. I also loved doing the antique shoe designs, and am considering turning them into a Can't Wait range too. ➔

LEFT Detail of a 54-tile panel featuring a Scottish house and garden **BELOW** The pretty garden studio has room for a kiln **BELOW RIGHT** Maggie at work



LEFT Auriculas make a good subject for a single tile. Prices start from £22

ABOVE Bespoke panels can feature any subject: this one is inspired by a vase of tulips



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