

HOMES

Glass impressions

Two artists create vibrant backsplashes, exotic doors, vessel sinks, even saucy door knobs

BY DANIEL DROLET

Glass is intrinsically beautiful - the way it catches the light and the way coloured glass dazzles the eye with rich, jewel-like brilliance.

It's also relatively easy to craft in that it can be rolled, swirled, blown, twisted and otherwise shaped to our will.

For centuries, glassmakers have been creating glass objects both practical and beautiful.

Ottawa artists are now finding new ways to take glass into home decor - ways that blend art and beauty with glass's hard-edged practicality. Think easy-to-clean glass backsplashes for the kitchen, colourful customized glass knobs for drawers, hand-crafted glass sinks or decorative glass shower stalls - in addition to the more known uses of glass in lamps, lights and stained glass windows.

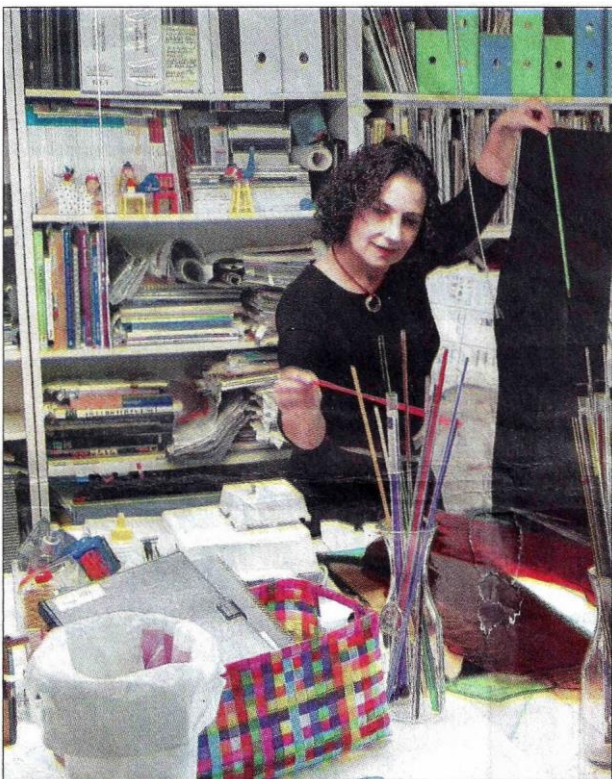
"Glass is very practical," says Delfina Falcao, a Brazilian-born industrial designer, ergonomics expert and Nortel alumna who now works as a glass artist out of a workshop in Kanata. Her sleek glass backsplashes are on display at ACCO Renovations Inc. on Richmond Road, a company that specializes in modern Euro-style kitchens.

A few blocks further up the street, artists at Stained Glass Stuff have their own take on kitchen backsplashes, creating unique glass tiles that add a pop of colour to a room.

Their techniques and approaches are very different, but the basic idea is the same: creating artwork with a practical side.

"People are sometimes scared when you start talking about art," says Falcao. "They say, 'Oh, art is expensive!' But the point of what I do is to be accessible. In terms of price, what I do is affordable when compared to other materials they use for backsplashes. And if you move, you can take my backsplashes with you."

Falcao's signature backsplashes are made of large rectangular sheets of tempered glass (three feet by six feet, for example) that are mounted on the wall behind a counter. The designs - she favours straight lines and geometric patterns - are for the most part done on the back of the glass, the part that is against the wall. The front of the backsplash, the part that's likely to get dirty, is left untouched so it can be wiped off.



Delfina Falcao has more degrees than you can count on one hand

PHOTOS BY JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Glass's see-through properties allow people to appreciate the patterns and designs through the backsplash.

The sheets are mounted on the wall with brackets. And if several sheets are needed to make up the backsplash, the joints are filled with silicone.

"My philosophy is that it's a piece of glass, if you get tired of it, is removable," says Falcao.

Kevin Tappin of Stained Glass Stuff has something very different to propose. His signature backsplashes are made of opaque glass tiles that are mounted on the wall in a pattern to create one-of-a-kind 0 works of art.

Tappin kind of fell into glasswork by accident.

His father opened Stained Glass Stuff in the late 1980s. When Tappin couldn't get a job after graduating from university, he started helping his dad around the store.

He never left. After handling the retail side of the operation for a few years, he became interested in glass fusing.

This is a technique in which different layers of glass - say, one layer that's coloured, one layer that's got metallic specs in it, and one layer that's clear - are fused together in a kiln to create a single sheet of glass that combines their interesting properties. That piece of glass can then be shaped into a bowl, for example, or tiles.

"Fusing has-opened up a whole new field for us," says Tappin, explaining that they are now making fused glass tiles for kitchens and bathrooms.

"You have the colour variety of stained glass, but it can be applied like ceramic tile," he says.

Because glass, when it's hot, can be shaped, they can even make glass pieces that fit around a corner. And whereas with ceramic a client is limited to what's commercially available, fused glass tiles can be customized both in colour, design and even size.

"We're really only limited by the size of the kiln," says Tappin.

Tappin is also making fused glass drawer pulls, sinks and decorative objects - all of which, he says, are very customizable.

Fusing is as a much science as art. When I visited the studio, I saw a beautiful bowl crack into four pieces as it was removed from a kiln -much to the disappointment of the artisan who had created it. He explained to me that the pieces of glass that are meant to be fused must all have the same physical properties. If one layer expands faster when heated in the kiln than another layer, the layers won't bond as they should. The artisan concluded that one of the layers in the bowl he was trying to make was out of sync with the others.

Customized art can come at a price.

A fused glass bathroom sink, says Tappin, can cost anywhere from several hundred dollars to several delfinafalcao.com thousand, "depending on what glass we're using and how we're building it."

Nevertheless, he says it is customization that is the big draw.

Falcao agrees.

"When a client contacts me, generally they want to do something unique," she says, explaining that some people have a clear idea of the, design they want, and others do not.

She likes to visit a client at home to see-the space.

"I take with me some materials and I improvise to create a design so they can visualize what I might do. I like people to visualize things so that we can interact. If they like it, I go ahead."

Tappin invites people to look at pattern books and photos and then he visits them at home for ideas. "If they have blue in the carpet, I might suggest some blue in the design as well," he says.

Falcao says customized home art is-catching on.

"I'll go do someone's backsplash, and after that they want me to come back to do tile bathroom," says Falcao. "One thing builds on another."

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