

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEARTLAND

Bringing back the Bronze Age

Denise Siegel Bronze tile maker/Wheeling

By Mary Daniels

Tribune staff reporter

February 6, 2005

The sculpted bronze tiles by Chicago artisan Denise Siegel were only a detail in the luxurious powder room designed by Tony Stavish, of A.W. Stavish Designs, Chicago, for the House Beautiful Makeover Show House in Glencoe last fall. But they were a detail that added a distinctive touch to the decor -- a touch of the ancient classic spa.

With her 2-inch bronze tile "dots" and a border of 2-by-12-inch bronze liners that were incorporated as accents in the French vanilla slate floor and the border of bronze wall tiles at chair-rail height encircling walls covered in tan ceramic tile, the result showed, as it has for millennia, that bronze and stone were meant for each other.

It's that match that underlies Siegel's New Bronze Age Tile Inc. Bronze is one of the oldest metals, an alloy consisting of 85 percent copper and the rest tin, lead and zinc. The original Bronze Age varies according to the region, but in Greece, we are talking 3000 to 1000 B.C., the Age of Heroes, of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey.

Art not war: Instead of swords, helmets and shields, Siegel has created decorative tiles of bronze that make designers come up with comments, such as this one from Stavish: "The tiles look aged in this wonderful way. They look like they were pulled out of a monastery in Scotland or England. . . . The tiles present an authentic historical look rather than simply a stylized re-creation."

A great relief: "I've always been fascinated by bas relief, sculpture built up on a flat surface" says the 51-year-old Siegel, whose studio is in Wheeling. "In high school, instead of painting, I ended up building a surface, which was a face, on canvas with papier mache."

Mixed marriage: Siegel has been creating the bronze tiles commercially for a year and a half. After she decided to work with bronze, she contacted Materials Marketing, a fabricator of high-end custom architectural stone and tile with 10 showrooms in the U.S. (including one at 1234 Fulton Ave., and another at 11 N. Grant St., Hinsdale). "I knew bronze went well with stone. When I went in and showed them my work, it took off from

there," she says.

Iron in the fire: Her designs are based on antique iron works from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Siegel teaches classes in sculpture in continuing education classes in Deerfield and Highland Park. "I am a buff. I have books of antique iron works and I have derived patterns from them. My tiles have this rustic, ancient look and they wear well," says Siegel.

Dreaming large: "I've been doing art all my life," says Siegel, who was born in Chicago, and raised in Evanston, Northbrook and Highland Park. "One night, I had a dream of a big, empty house and the only thing in it was a big sculpture. I woke up and thought, I think I will take a class in sculpture. That was 12 years ago. I was in the clay five seconds and I knew I was home and this was what I wanted to do."

Positive thinking: After she designs and sculpts a piece of tile in clay as a positive, a negative is made in rubber. Then a positive is made in wax from the rubber mold. The foundry displaces the wax with bronze through a sand-casting method. "The sand casting process is a much less expensive process," Siegel says, "which makes even custom commissions more affordable."

Buffer state: When the tiles are returned to her from the foundry, they are dirty and need to be cleaned and degreased, patinaed, burnished, waxed and buffed, rubbed to bring out highlights, and then waxed. "It is the same treatment that has been done for centuries," she says. "The tiles have a look that is different because they are handmade, not machine-made, and that is the appeal."

Lining up: From Feb. 25, Siegel's line of bronze tiles called "Antiquity Bronze" will be available at Ann Sacks Tile and Stone showrooms nationwide, including its Chicago store at 501 N. Wells St., 312-923-0919. The new line includes tiles and liners in various rustic patterns and will be featured on Siegel's Web site, newbronzeagetile.com after the launch at Ann Sacks. These tiles will range in price from \$20 to \$50.

Showcase tiles: For information on how to get the "Foundry Masters" bronze tiles that were used in the House Beautiful Makeover Show House, contact Materials Marketing Ltd. at www.materials-marketing.com. Retail prices of this line range from \$20 each for 1- and 2-inch tiles to \$40 each for 4-inch tiles to \$30 to \$70 for liners.

Custom design work: Siegel also does custom bronze commissions, such as the 18-inch squares in an abstract design she created to go behind a cook top. For custom bronze work, contact Siegel at 847-212-7209 or send e-mail to denisesiegel@earthlink.net.

Class act: Siegel worked for a year under well-known Chicago sculptor Erik Blome, who created a monument for the Chicago Blackhawks that stands in front of the United Center, and was his student for many years. She also took a patina workshop by Ron Young, who is based in California. "The patinas I use have been done since bronze has been patinaed, not all that different than when used in sculpture in the Renaissance."