

HOME

SATURDAY, JANUARY 15, 2011 • LATIMES.COM/HOME



Photographs by R. DANIEL FOSTER

Piece by piece

A Silver Lake couple adds plenty of punch to a 1928 Spanish bungalow with colorful tile mosaics. The details, fun but carefully planned, all tell a story.

R. DANIEL FOSTER

Consider the whimsy that frames the hearth in David Edward Byrd and Jolino Beserra's 1928 Spanish bungalow. Clothed in broken ceramics and found and treasured objects, the fireplace resembles an outside toy. The swirled mosaic pattern and jumble of shiny fun make one suspect it's crowded with spir-its.

"In fact," says Beserra, "it is."

"We built the fireplace as our portrait," adds Beserra, who in 1997 bought the three-bedroom Silver Lake home with Byrd, his partner of 28 years. The couple's birth dates, initials, portraits and other personal items are embedded in the piece. A collection of 1930s and '40s salt and pepper shakers (birds, devils, fat airplanes and a pair of American Indians) are strewn throughout the face and sides. Beserra found many of the items at swap meets.

"I place narratives in all my work," says Beserra, who based the fireplace partly on Van Gogh's "The Starry Night." "You can't look at one of my pieces and not think of a time or place in history. Ten different people will relay 10 different stories."

The salt and pepper shakers belonged to Beserra's grandmother Maria [See Silver Lake, E3]



WHIMSICAL: Broken ceramics and found objects make the fireplace an outside toy, top. "We built the fireplace as our portrait," says Jolino Beserra, at right with David Edward Byrd, his partner of 28 years. The couple's birth dates, initials, portraits and other personal items are embedded in the piece.

DESIGN



DETAILED: Salt and pepper shakers, left, are included in the fireplace; while the kitchen back-splash has monkeys. The latest addition is an outdoor shower, pictured here in detail as well as below.

PIECED TOGETHER



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READY TO COOK: The lemon-orange kitchen completes a surge of color that travels from the cobalt blue entryway and lime chiffon living room to the blood-red walls of the dining room. White serves as a neutralizer.

[Silver Lake, from E1] Jimenez, his family's matriarch who loved to flamenco dance. "She was a little pistol and lived to 94," says Beserra, who was born in East Los Angeles. "She died around the time we built this."

The couple topped the original stucco fireplace with a foot of concrete to add more presence, then arranged ceramics in color fields before hand setting them with tile mastic, finished later with grouting. Beserra recently framed the dining room's patio entryway and an outdoor shower with mosaics.

"Some people see this and say, 'I could do that,' and they go home and attempt it," says Beserra. "Then they call and ask me to help them save it."

The pucky fireplace harbors a mixed of styles. Beserra began the work with a serape-inspired border that reflects his Latino heritage. At the center is a primitive Virgin shrine carved from a concrete block found in a Santa Fe, N.M., gallery. "I loved that she has a peace sign on her belly," says Beserra, who transitioned from a graphics career to mosaics about 1990. "A nice tweak."

Pencil drawings of Broadway posters for "Follies" and "Godspell," rendered by Byrd, hang to the left of the fireplace. Along with other posters for Broadway hits, Byrd also created posters for Jimi Hendrix, the Who, the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane and the Woodstock music festival, among hundreds of others.

"I ran with a pretty fast crowd," says Byrd, who for 11 years also was a senior illustrator for Warner Bros. "After my youth in New York City and all of that, this home is a nice place to rest."

Beserra was influenced by Watts Towers creator Simon Rodia. "I volunteered for a summer helping with restoration in 1989 and loved the fluidity of his work," says Beserra, who calls himself a consummate "puzler." Other influences include Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí and Philadelphia mosaic artist Isaiha Zagar.

Area libraries have commissioned Beserra to install his brand of fun in their children and young adult reading rooms. He's created mosaic installations for Alhambra, Camarillo and South Pasadena libraries.

"People never grow tired of his work," says Sandi Banks, senior city librarian for Camarillo Public Library. "They always find new things; they just can't stop looking." The library commissioned Beserra to create a 30-foot-long bench and two-story fluted columns for its young adult reading room.

Mosaics are not readily recognized as a legitimate art form, Beserra says, largely "because you can go to the store and buy a little kit to make a mosaic pot." He hopes to change that with his creations and use of the term *pique assiette*, a French mosaic style linked to Raymond Edouard Isadore who in the 1930s covered his Chartres home and garden in broken ceramics.

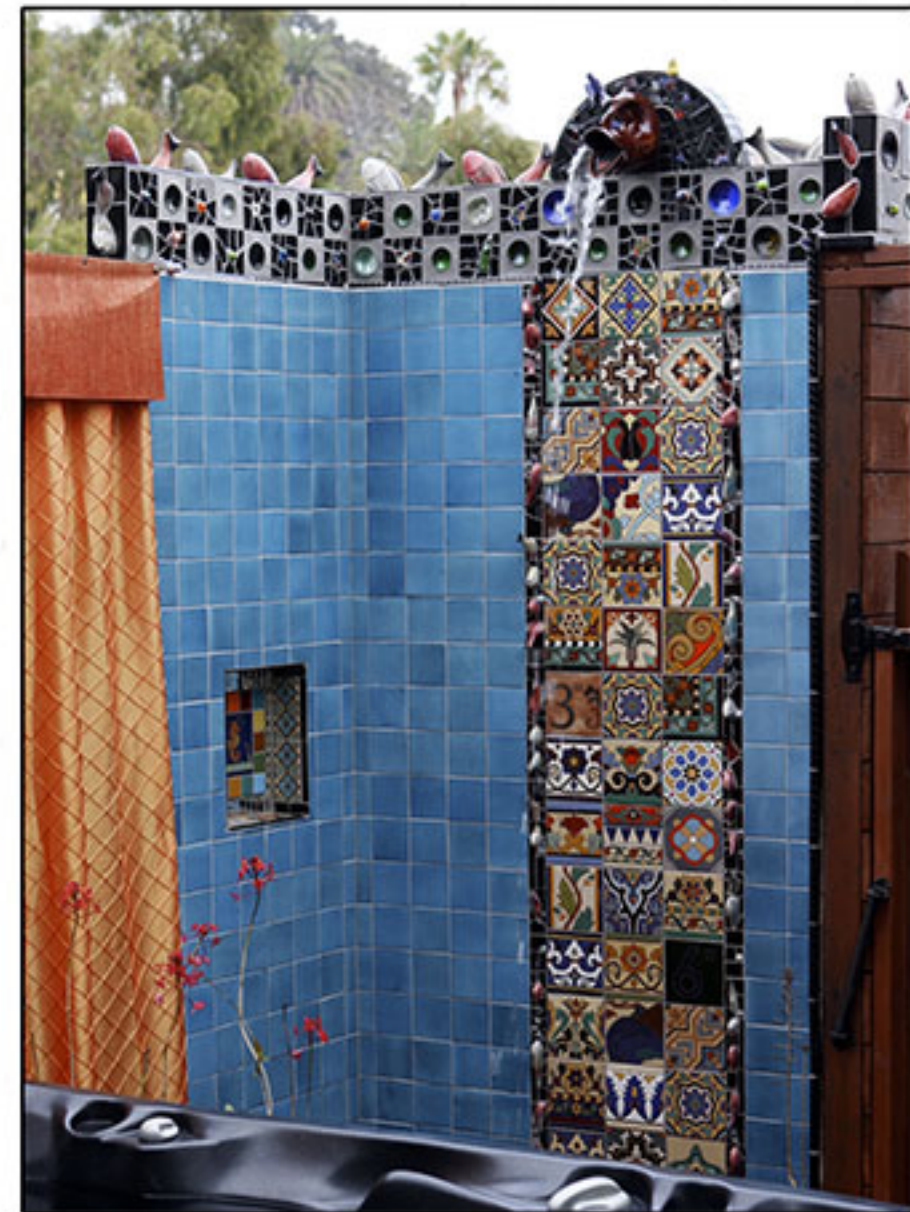
Beserra's commissioned work costs \$5,500 to \$12,000 for a fireplace, depending on the size. And he charges \$200 to \$300 per square foot for kitchen backsplashes.

The couple's lemon-orange kitchen, dominated by a 1949 O'Keefe & Merritt stove, completes a surge of pigment that travels from the cobalt blue entryway and lime chiffon living room to the blood red walls of the dining room.

"The best neutralizer for all that color was clearly white," says Beserra, who used a food theme to create the kitchen's black-and-white mosaic backsplash. He began with Mr. Potato Head and see-hear- and speak-no-evil monkey mugs, and added his grandmother's ceramic spone jars. Other items are from Grandmother's ceramic discontinued Slice of Life kitchenware line.

Near a cabinet, a white cow's bum juts out from the wall. "I love using butts," says Beserra, who keeps a drawer full of derrières in wait for proper placement. "I often stick one on a corner, and place the object's head on the opposite side. People respond to the humor in my work. It allows me to be slightly subversive."

home@latimes.com



BIG BOLD COLORS: Mosaics frame the home's outdoor shower, left. Beserra based the fireplace design partly on Van Gogh's painting "The Starry Night."