

TILING WITH AN EXPERT

By Kevin Lumberg

Few products in the sublimation world are as loved and misunderstood as much as tiles. So for this reason we contacted and expert in this field. We run across many people in our sublimation travels, and this person is the most respected expert in the sublimation tile field. He has also done more to progress this field and constantly shares his knowledge. This expert is Paul Whitehill, and we talked with him to find out a little bit more about his passion for sublimated tiles.

WHO IS PAUL

Paul Whitehill has been actively involved in the sublimation industry for over eight years. He currently is owner of Images In Tile, LLC, based in Joplin, Missouri, where he offers custom ceramic tile murals to the architectural and interior design industry. Paul also owns and operates Bison Coating & Supply in Joplin, MO, a tile coating facility and manufacturer of glass tiles that revolutionized custom full color graphics for commercial and residential floor applications.

SQS: How did you get into sublimation?

PAUL: "I was hired by a heat press manufacturer, to help write marketing plan to get into the digital industry. I did research in digital printing, and discovered sublimation printing, and found the huge variety of products that could be sublimated."

SQS: How did you get into sublimating tiles?

PAUL: "During my research, I heard about tiles, and went and bought own sublimation printer system. I did some testing and one of the first things I sublimated was a tile. It was a very colorful parrot, and my jaws dropped to the floor. Most of my research was geared toward gift industry, but I saw a market for custom tile murals, especially in commercial applications, such as hotels, restaurants and such. I left the job with the heat press company and went on a quest to learn as much as he could about sublimation. I met Rich Nealy of US Photo Coatings, the person that developed RN coatings, and I told Rich I needed a more durable coating for the commercial applications, and Rich told me he already had it. I went to Sawgrass Technologies to learn about printers, and worked for a year as a consultant for people wanting to start a sublimation business, but I couldn't get



Tile mural in Dan Marino's restaurant in Las Vegas.

anyone to bite on the tile idea. Finally a friend asked me why I was trying to get everyone else to do it and just do it myself.”

SQS: What is the roadblock for people to grasp the sublimated tile concept?

PAUL: “Sublimated tiles do not fit into an easy niche. We serve the awards and engraving and recognition industry and when a new product or process comes out, it is an easy fit because we know that industry. I never installed a tile in my life and there was a lot to overcome. You have to know about tile installation, so I spent 6 months learning the tile business, and that can scare people. There are not necessarily rules, but guidelines for tile installation. You have to understand grout spacing, and the reason for grout spacing, and what type of materials to use for sheet rock walls and cement walls. It is a technical point that people don’t know that may back them off a little bit. There is a lingo that goes with that industry. Such as Coefficient of friction. What is that? That is the slip resistance of a tile.



Paul with his most emotional mural at Arizona State University.

People in the Awards and Engraving industry have good computer skills to be able to design great products for their customers, but with commercial tile murals, you have to be able to work with someone that comes to you with a concept and you have to be able to bring that concept to reality, and you may have to do that before you secure the job. Further, you have to have the ability to work with very large scale files.”

SQS: How do you approach the commercial tile market?

PAUL: “You have to work with the designers and architects. If someone came to me and said, hey, I know the owner of a restaurant, I would say I don’t want to talk to them. I want to talk to the designer or the architect. They are being paid to tell the owner how to decorate the restaurant. So, if you bring the tile concept to the designer it can be incorporated into the design and presented to the owner.”

SQS: How does that differ from the Awards and Gift industry?

PAUL: The Awards and Gift industry, is much easier for customers to grasp. Maybe taking a 12”x18” mural and putting it into a frame. It is a different market when it goes from something permanently installed in a structure versus something hanging in a structure.”

SQS: How has the industry changed?

PAUL: “It has changed immensely. When I first started it was virtually unheard of, and that was hard to overcome. In fact, I once went into a high end tile store, and told them, I had a nice picture of a parrot, and I wanted it put on tile. They said it could be painted, and but I said I wanted a photographic image. They laughed at me and said it could be

done. I went outside and got the small mural from my car and it blew them away. There is a lot more awareness now. You can find information all over the internet. The murals are also being used in very public and high end places. Walt Disney, Krogers, Publix, Hilton Hotels all have sublimated murals. Further, the technology has gotten much better. Printers have improved, colors have improved, and quality has improved.”

SQS: What new innovations are on the horizon?

PAUL: “The Industry has been stuck on the basic tiles. 4x4, 6x6, and so on. Bison Coating has added more variety and types of tiles such as 12x18 18x18, mosaic tiles, as well as new glass products. Also, we do custom tile coating all the time, with some minimums.”

SQS: Speaking of coating, what makes a good coating versus a bad coating?

PAUL: “Coating serves multiple markets. Gift tiles do not need the durability. It may be on a shelf with an easel back and be dusted every once in a while. On the other end of the spectrum, the tile may be in a hotel bathroom as part of a mural and may be touched every single day either by the guest or cleaned by housekeeping. You need a commercial durable coating and that is what Rich Neely developed for Bison Coating. You have very high gloss coating which images really wonderfully, but is a soft coating not meant for commercial applications. You have a satin coating which the base coating is used on mugs which are commercial dishwasher safe. Then you have the Matte coating. The satin and matte are meant for commercial applications. Some of the old world art looks great on the matte coating, whereas satin may be better for photographic art. The fourth coating is the coating used on glass. That is also commercial grade.”

SQS: What was your favorite tile job?

PAUL: “Most emotional was a Pat Tillman mural at Arizona State University. It is outside the football locker room and all the players touch the mural as they run to the field. The most fun was a Dan Marino mural in one of Dan’s restaurants in Las Vegas, using 420 of Dan’s personal photos commemorating his career as the background with a larger photo in the foreground. 420 is the number of touchdown passes Dan threw in his career”

SQS: There is a lot of confusion on outdoor applications for sublimated tiles. What about fading in the sun?

PAUL: I have done more outside applications than just about anyone, and I have made the mistakes. You have to understand up front. Sublimation dyes will fade in direct sunlight, no matter what products they are on. There are some coatings that can protect the dyes a little longer. Outdoor murals can be protected from the direct sunlight by overhangs or awnings or courtyards, and they can be very successful. I always use the Matte finish as it is much more durable. In climates that freeze I use matte coated porcelain tile as they won’t absorb moisture and crack when they freeze. I have done murals in the sun with the clients understanding that they will fade.”

THE TRAIL HAS BEEN BLAZED

Paul has written a lot of articles, and done a lot of training on tiles, and people ask him why he is training his competition. Paul says the market is more than big enough for everyone, and as he said, he has made the mistakes and is here to help people be successful, so you can start sublimating tiles today and see why they truly can ignite a passion in you.