

## Transformed By Stylish Tiles

BY SHERIDAN SANSEGUNDO

If someone says, "I'm going to build my dream house," what they really mean is that someone else is going to build it for them.

Not so Fredi Cohen, who has just completed her house in Northwest Woods. Ms. Cohen, an artist and ceramicist, has made the hand sinks and the counter tops, the drawer pulls and the coffee table. She has handmade the surrounds of all the doors and windows, built an indoor fountain, and to date has created nearly 6,000 relief tiles.

While she didn't construct the house itself, she designed it and, when her builder left her in the lurch, she acted as her own contractor. Ms. Cohen, obviously, has the energy of a major league football team.

### Seeking Peace

A native New Yorker, Ms. Cohen had a Manhattan studio where she worked as an artist full time from 1987, when her life-sized sculpture of rape, "Abuse of Power," won first prize in an international competition and garnered her an award from a task force on victim abuse.

But she had reached the point where she wanted peace and quiet and a country life. She first tried rural Pennsylvania, where she found rather too much of what she was looking for: bears, wild turkeys, cold winters, hunting, and isolation. So she found land in East Hampton.

"I'd been coming here since I was a child" she said, "but after Pennsyl-

vania it seemed so mild, so gentle; no wild animals or extremes of temperature."

### Woodland Wildlife

It is the wildlife of the Northwest Woods that provides the unifying theme for the ceramic tiles in the house, particularly a series of triangular tiles portraying eight stylized animals: squirrel, swan, cricket, owl, snake, deer, raccoon, and songbird.

On the kitchen floor, the animal tiles are heavily glazed and range in color from pale gray to brown. They were fired in a gas kiln, a process that produces great variation in color. Elsewhere they reappear in a soft turquoise glaze in a bathroom or, maybe the prettiest, as natural terracotta with a coating of ivory glaze that has pooled in the crevices of the carving.

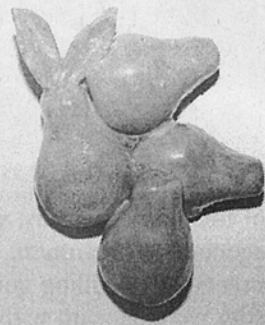
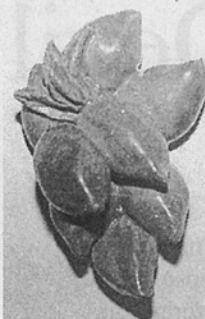
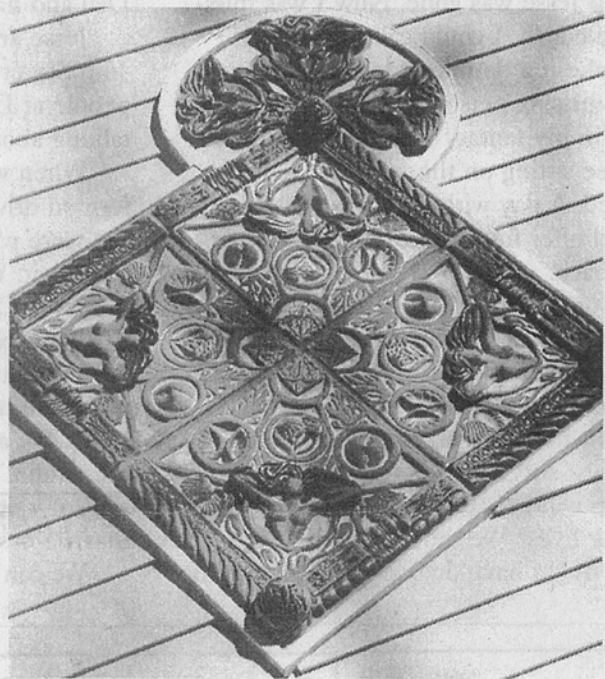
"I had all these ideas for tiles, but I couldn't find anyone who knew how to make them. There were so many different demands — some must be weather-resistant, others strong enough to walk on, the glazes for floor tiles shouldn't be slippery, and the countertop tiles must be easy to wipe clean."

### Kept Them Moving

She called studios and clay workers and through experimentation and patching information together she perfected her technique.

During the year and a half that the

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## Tiles

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house was under construction, Ms. Cohen was commuting to East Hampton four days a week and the rest of the time she was tearing about Manhattan and Brooklyn from one studio to another, making tiles.

"I'd take them to one studio to be bisque-fired, then take them home to my apartment, glaze them, and take them back to be fired again. They could only handle a few at a time. I couldn't keep too many in my apartment because the floor might have collapsed, so I had to keep driving them out to East Hampton to a storage space."

"The worst thing was the parking — I got so many tickets while I was loading and unloading."

Little by little, she started to impose her artistic will on the house. The kitchen tiles were laid so the cabinets could go in and then each drawer and cupboard received its ceramic vegetable handle; artichoke and asparagus, beetroot and banana, pear and pomegranate, beans, carrots, garlic; each one different.

But while the kitchen is impressive, it's the bathrooms that have the greatest Wow!-factor. In the master bathroom, a mermaid coils around the sink and the floor, bath, and shower have tiles molded with fish and shells in a range of soft grays and turquoise.

In the guest bathroom there is another mermaid sink, this one in a bright sea green, and a mosaic of tiles on the walls in turquoise, celadon, pinks, and blues.

On the front of the house, there is an imposing frieze the color of weathered copper and two huge sculptural bas-reliefs bolted into the structure of the building. The caramel color of the rough unglazed stoneware predominates.

The steps leading up to the house are bare concrete; Rome wasn't built in a day. They are awaiting their glazed risers and white concrete tiles featuring East End sea creatures, including a particularly endearing lobster. More concrete tiles are laid out in the back garden, on their way to becoming a terrace.

Ms. Cohen now works in a well-lighted studio in the semi-basement of the house. There are two kilns and a powerful slab roller for the clay, and plaster molds for ceramic tiles and rubber molds for concrete tiles. The tables are covered with glaze and color experiments and a line of complementary tiles in a mix of plain and relief, small and large, that she hopes to market.

Because, although it's hard to see where she finds the time, Ms. Cohen doesn't just create for herself. She will make a bathroom from scratch or match a client's imagination with hers for creating just about anything. Her tiles can also be found at Ann Sacks, a tile company on East 16th Street in Manhattan.

And then there is a big sprawling mantelpiece in the living room to be done, outdoor tables and benches, the kitchen countertop, walkways, stair risers. . . .

THE FRIEZE of tiles around the front door, upper left, is the color of weathered copper. One of the large bas-reliefs on the side of the house, below left, features mermaids and shells and is partly glazed and partly raw biscuit-colored stoneware. Each handle on the kitchen drawers and cabinets is a different fruit or vegetable including, upper right, radishes and pears. Triangular animal tiles include fish, swans, and raccoons.

Sheridan Sanssegundo Photos

