

Installing Paper-Faced Mounted Glass Tile

by Gary Piscopo (c) 2007, All Rights Reserved



In the last issue, we discussed creating your own paper-faced glass mosaic tiles. Today, we'll go into detail on how to install the tiles you made.

Installation of paper-faced glass mosaic tiles takes a bit of patience and requires some attention to detail. Paper facing is typically used for glass tiles that have some level of translucency to them; whereas, if a mesh backing was used it may show through the finished tile. The paper face allows you to install the tiles with no backing, so if you do see through the tile you won't see the underlying mesh. Paper-face tiles are also popular because they cost less to manufacture than fiberglass, mesh-backed tiles, thus they can be purchased at a lower price. If you're good at paying attention to detail and not rushing through your project, you'll find that installing paper-faced tiles can be quite rewarding.

The tools needed for installing paper-faced tiles are the same that you would use for installing any other tiles. For cutting glass tiles, a Leponitt glass mosaic cutter is preferred by professionals. You may need to use a saw if you have curves that will need to be cut.

The requirements for the backing (the wall behind the tiles) are the same as they are for ceramic tiles. Be sure to choose the appropriate backing according to the environment in which you're installing the tiles. Use cement board for showers and high moisture areas, green board for areas with occasional moisture, and drywall for areas where you're sure it won't receive any moisture. If you use the wrong backing there is a danger of the tiles coming loose years down the road.

Because glass tiles have a bit of translucency, you'll need to use a latex-modified, white thin set for adhering the tiles. You can easily find this at your local building supply store. Let them know that you'll be installing glass tiles and they'll give you the appropriate thin set. (Just verify for yourself that it is white.) When you mix the thin set it won't appear perfectly white; it will be more grey in color. If the label says white,

then you do have the correct color. It'll lighten up and be much closer to white once it dries.

Once you have collected your tools, prepared your surface, marked a few reference lines, and mixed your thin set; you're ready to start installing the tiles. Follow these steps for the setting process.

Step 1: Apply thin set using the notched end of your trowel, holding the trowel at about 45 degrees to the surface. The notches will measure just the right amount of thin set to leave on the surface.

Step 2: Using the flat side of your trowel lightly flatten the peaks and remove the valleys of the thin set. This is so that there won't be any empty spaces behind the tiles, as this will show through on the clear and semi-clear tiles. Be sure not to remove any of the thin set or move it, as you have measured just the right amount in the previous step.

Step 3: Set your first sheet of tiles on the thin set, making sure you align it with the reference lines you created during preparation. Press the tiles with firm, but even pressure. Apply adjacent sheets of tiles aligning the tiles with the first sheet. Be sure to set the spacing between sheets to match the spacing between the tiles. Getting the sheets lined up and the spacing correct is critical to the success of the project, so take your time at this point and make it look good.

Step 4: Using a wooden beating block (a short piece of 2x4 or other such block of wood), even out the surface of the tiles with light tapping using a hammer on the beating block. This makes sure that there are no raised tiles and the finished surface is flat and smooth.

Step 5: Apply the remaining sheets using this same process.

Step 6: After about 20 minutes you'll need to remove the paper. Using a wet sponge, dampen the paper on the tiles. Keeping the paper wet for about 10 minutes will dissolve the glue holding the paper to the tile.

Step 7: Gently remove the paper from the tiles. The paper should be easy to remove if the glue has dissolved completely. When removing the paper, pull it back on itself to ensure that you don't lift any tiles.

Step 8: Replace any tiles that are chipped or cracked. Typically you'll find a couple of tiles that need replacement. Lift the chipped tile using a screwdriver then apply a small amount of thin set to the back of the replacement tile (butter backing). Firmly press the tile into place. Make sure the surface of the replacement tile is even with the tiles around it.

Step 9: Allow the tile to cure for a minimum of 24 hours.

Step 10: Clean any remaining glue from the tiles using a sponge, warm water, and a nylon scrub brush. Let the tiles dry before going to the next step.

Step 11: Now you're ready to apply the grout. You'll want to use a non-sanded grout in a color that compliments the color of your tiles. I recommend using a similar color, but in a lighter shade. (If you're unsure about the shade, it is better to err to the lighter side.) Using a rubber grout float, work the grout into the spaces between the tiles. Hold the float at about 45 degrees to the surface work the grout into the spaces in between the tiles. For the final pass, use a diagonal sweep - this ensures that the spaces have grout up to the surface of the tiles.

Step 12: Remove the extra grout from the surface of the glass tiles using your rubber float; holding it nearly 90 degrees to the surface and scraping in a diagonal path. Be sure not to remove any of the grout from in between the tiles.

Step 13: Let the grout set for about 20 minutes. You want the grout to harden, but not cure. Gently clean the surface of the glass tiles using a damp sponge. Again, be sure not to remove any of the grout from between the tiles. Cleaning the surface is much easier when the grout hasn't cured, if you wait 24 hours it will be very difficult to clean. I emphasize that you need to be very gentle when cleaning the surface, use

very light pressure and rinse the sponge often.

Step 14: Allow the grout to set for 24 hours then clean the remaining haze by polishing the tiles with a dry cloth. Once you have finished with the final cleaning, apply grout sealer according to the manufacturers' instructions. The sealer will help to protect the grout and extend the life of the project.

You're done! While making and installing paper-faced mosaic tiles can be a somewhat lengthy process, the results are usually amazing. You can be proud to show off your new room. You're friends and family will be quite impressed!