

GOING FOR THE GOLD

Local 4 Members Restore and Replace 300,000 Tiny Tiles for Academy Museum

BY JAMES DUFFY V

Five stories above the traffic of Wilshire Boulevard, a crew of Tilelayers carefully applies 24-karat gold leaf squares to an 80-year-old mosaic for the new Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

With each tile pressed into epoxy, like the builders of Hollywood's Golden Age, Trades members illuminate a Los Angeles monument of stylish architectural heritage. The building seems tailor-made for the film museum it will house when it opens in 2019.

The museum is a combination of the restored historic May Co. department store at the corner of Fairfax and Wilshire Boulevards, now called the Saban Building, and a new theater wing adjoining it to the north.

The May Co. was constructed in the Streamline Moderne architectural style in 1939. At that time, the ornamental flourishes of earlier periods were minimized. The building's flashiest statement was a six-story-high cylinder mosaic of 300,000 Italian tiles, each one square inch.

The gold mosaic shines from the building's rounded corner, representing the aerodynamic shapes of the automotive and aerospace industries developing in that era. 1939 is also considered the greatest year in

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Journeyman Beto Ramirez polishes new and restored tile.

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"I feed my family with this union; I own what I own because of the Trade," says journeyman Rafael Tapia.



Journeyman Loi Hoang.



Journeyman Nelson Ramirez.

GOLD

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movie-making history.

But unlike a classic film, many of the tiles did not survive over the decades. When the Academy started its museum project in 2015, two-thirds were slated to be replaced. Integrating the brand-new tiles with the existing ones is a challenge being met by Bricklayers & Allied Craftworkers Local 4.

Premier Tile & Marble Inc. was selected to handle the restoration of the gold mosaic. Premier is a signatory contractor to Local 4.

"I've had to have some guys leave the job because they didn't get me the quality I needed to do this," said Wesley Carnehl, Premier's tile foreman. "You can't be impa-

tient. It can be overwhelming because everything is piece by piece."

Gold leaf glass tiles cost the Academy \$400 per square foot and had to be imported from Venice, Italy, from the same manufacturer that made them in the 1930s.

"We are replacing, by hand, 200,000 of them, and all of this is taking place in this strange little family-owned business called Orsini," said Katharine DeShaw, the Academy Museum's managing director.

The site's restorer and preservationist, John Fidler, contacted prominent historians from Italy and across the United States to track original building materials.

"Basically, a bunch of building restoration experts looked at it and said, 'oh forget it, it's a disaster, replace it,'" DeShaw said. "And Fidler said, 'no, no, no, we're going to lovingly restore it.'"

Rafael Tapia has been a union Tilelayer for 21 years. He confirmed it took him a while to get used to the pace of applying the

mosaic.

"Even though you've done it before, you're learning," Tapia said. He's not intimidated by signature projects. "Disney, Universal Studios, Dodger Stadium, you name it, we've done it all."

Tapia is currently using his wages to pay for his three boys' education and a new house in Fontana. He said he thinks of his family when he is applying the tiny gold tiles.

"I feed my family with this union and thanks to this, I have what I have; I own what I own because of the Trade," Tapia said.

Local 4 business agent Pete Gerber was monitoring the progress of the site on a June afternoon.

"These are the most experienced in the country," Gerber said.

DeShaw called her union construction partners "amazing, smart, passionate," and "so dedicated."

"They're always excited to share the new things they're uncovering and discovering, or new installations that are taking place," DeShaw said. "You know, it's really become a sort of family environment for many of us."

Fidler affirmed the confidence gained in the union's ability.

"All credit to Premier Tile because it was kind of new to them," Fidler said. "It was a collaborative effort to find the best ways to do what we have to do."

Caution about who works on the site has to do with the high cost of the project and the special materials used. The black diamond granite that lines the fins of the gold mosaic is no longer available from the original source in San Diego.

So now, on the ground level, workers from Western Specialty Contractors cut 1,800-pound Cordova limestone blocks with a wet diamond skill saw. The limestone has fossilized sea shells in it and

Photos by

KENNETH JOHANSSON



Wesley Carnehl, Premier Tile & Marble foreman, left, and Local 4 business agent Pete Gerber.



"The workers are amazing, smart, passionate and so dedicated," says Katharine DeShaw, museum managing director.



Second-period apprentice Joseph Llanes.

had to be quarried and shipped from Texas. Rob Leber oversees the cutting of the blocks for Western.

“These come from a riverbed in Texas so you only get one shot to get it right,” Leber said. “They measure a dozen times before they turn the saw on.”

Dedication and Efficiency

Leaders from the general contractor, Matt Construction, also praised their partners in the Building Trades. Matt’s project safety manager, Michael Bartolome, said he admired the active role workers took in safety.

“If there are things where they’re not sure of how to do it safely, they’ll notify me,” Bartolome said. “We’ll get together and we’ll brainstorm. They get involved on the operations.”

Superintendent of façade restoration Josh Rosenbeck said he is impressed with the efficiency and dedication of his

Building Trades partners.

“The Trades provided a foreman that’s highly capable and understands the importance of doing the work, but also the historic value of preserving everything possible in place,” Rosenbeck said. “All this is once-in-a-lifetime stuff. That gold mosaic on the corner, most of these guys will never do anything like that again.”

Retrofitting improves the May Co.’s outdated building methods.

“Once you open the stone it’s typically not what you expect,” Rosenbeck said. “How they fabricated it, how they deviated from the plans, so you have to adjust to everything on the fly.”

Rosenbeck said sisal rope was found lining window boxes in place of modern water sealant. When rope moistens it expands, keeping out some of the water.

“Some of the things used to hold the building together were really ancient,” Fidler, the site preservationist, said. “A

lot of the guys that worked on the movie sets were Italian *stuccodore*—plasterers.

“All over LA, when there were no films going on, they would get out and work on building sites. You can see some exotic stuff in the Moorish style, the gothic horror style. A lot of this was from guys on the movie sets, like Grauman’s Chinese Theatre.”

Fidler said that unlike today, set builders of Hollywood’s gilded age did not necessarily build for preservation or for safety.

“They weren’t interested in the long term, so building materials used to be more ephemeral for the most part—a lot of stucco pretending to be stone,” Fidler said. “But the May Company building, they shelled out a lot of money for some really first-class materials.”

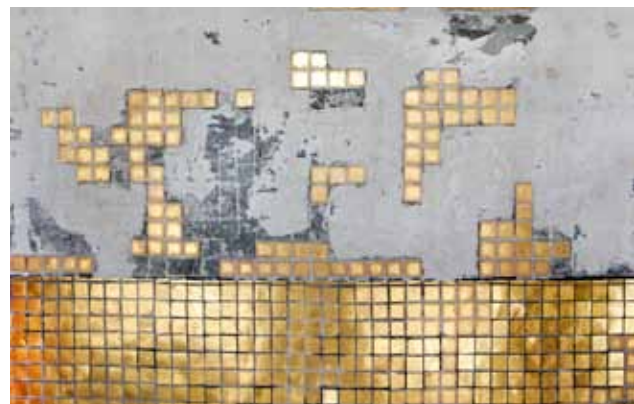
And now, the Building Trades are providing the first-class workforce to bring the building into the future.



This rendering shows the restored column.



The column was the signature feature of the May Co. department store.



About two-thirds of the tiles are being replaced.



Each tile is one square inch.



The museum is slated to open in 2019.



Inch by inch, BAC 4 members bring the tiles back to life.