

A Brief History of Terrazzo

Terrazzo descended directly from simplified forms of centuries-old styles of marble mosaics that were used in Venice by the mid-16th century. Today's highly evolved terrazzo is an environmentally friendly material that combines extraordinary design potential, optimum durability, low maintenance. Terrazzo is the lowest cost flooring material available based on its life cycle.

Green from the Beginning

Terrazzo was created when resourceful Venetian mosaic workers discovered a way to reuse marble remnants. With odd-size chips, they began to build terraces around their living quarters.



Terrazzo Grinders & Finishers...up to 1920

Techniques for leveling these surfaces progressed from rubbing with a stone by hand, to the development of long-handled, weighted grinding stone, called a *galero*.

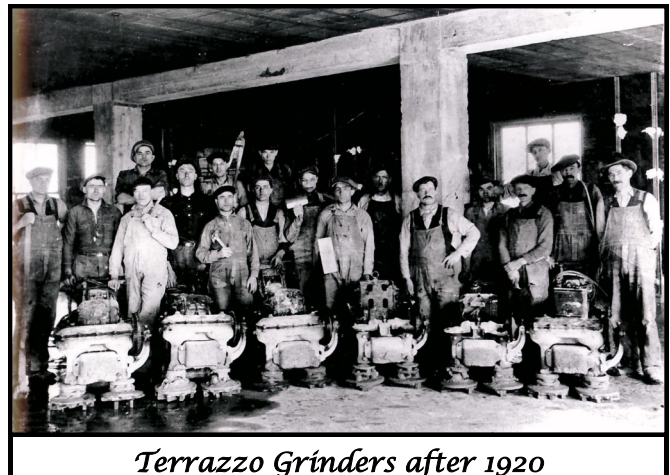
The first sealer for terrazzo was discovered when workers noticed that a coating of goat milk brought out the rich colors and sheen of the marble.

The Immigration of an Industry

The terrazzo and mosaic industry in 16th century Italy was practically the monopoly of craftsmen from the Friuli region. This industry has remained remarkably intact, held by the families from this area through many generations and through the shifting of the entire industry to North America.

The first terrazzo in the US was laid by Italian craftsmen in 1890 in the Vanderbilt residence on Fifth Avenue in New York. At that time, mosaics had also been recently introduced in the US, and were generally preferred over terrazzo.

Then, between 1900 and 1915, three million Italians immigrated to the US. Terrazzo and mosaic workers, because their work was so highly skilled and valued, were regarded as the aristocracy of the immigrant labor force. The *terazzeri*, as these workers were called, were regarded as true artists; they jealously guarded the secrets of their craft, handing them down from father to son. These family businesses built a powerful network of firms that expanded the terrazzo trade and dominated the market across the US.



Terrazzo Grinders after 1920

Terrazzo in the 1920s: Ready for Prime Time

In the post-World War I era, Terrazzo became a flooring of choice in the US, suddenly overtaking and replacing the use of marble mosaics, for several reasons.

Architects in the '20s were the first to recognize the vast design potential of terrazzo. For the smooth, curvilinear Art Deco/Modern styles of the period, terrazzo happened to be the ideal medium.

Furthermore, the invention of the electric grinder in 1924 brought about a finer finish, greater speed and accuracy and lowered costs, all contributing to the spread of terrazzo all over the US.

Many of the country's most noteworthy buildings of the day, stunning examples of classic design, craftsmanship and durability, were built with terrazzo, including the State Building, Radio City Music Hall and the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Also in 1924, Terrazzo and mosaic contractors from all over the US created the National Terrazzo and Mosaic Contractors Association, today known as the National Terrazzo and Mosaic Association, Inc.

Divide and Conquer: Functional Beauty

Yet another mid-20s advance in terrazzo came with the availability of brass divider strips, which made possible the creation of highly artistic and intricate patterns and designs in terrazzo floors. From the early forms of terrazzo, divider strips, beginning with wood and evolving to marble along with zinc metal and even plastic, have allowed for expansion and contraction of the surface to prevent cracking.

Limitless Colors, Ultimate in Design & Performance

In more recent years, new developments with epoxies, polyesters, latex and acrylics have continued to make terrazzo ever more cost-effective, high functioning and versatile. The spectrum of colors is now unlimited. Rustic terrazzo is a uniformly textured surface designed for exterior use in which the matrix is depressed to expose the chips. The newer thin-set and epoxy-based terrazzo options are less labor intensive with greater design flexibility.



The National Terrazzo & Mosaic Association, Inc.

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