

# "Plunging" into the History of Your Bathroom

## Trends in Bath Design before World War II By Anne DeWolf

It's usually the smallest room in the house and a close second to kitchens when it comes to being updated. When determining how to renovate the bathroom, it's important to research to learn what is most appropriate for the style of your home and of course what fits your lifestyle and budget.

### The outhouse comes in-house

With the newly perceived need for hygiene and the use of in-house plumbing, the wash closet (as it was commonly referred to) became a standard room in the urban home during the end of the 19th century.

The earliest bathrooms were more antiseptic and strictly functional by design. It was the most used room in the house, but Victorian etiquette made it the least talked about. The plumbing fixtures were white glazed or enameled tubs, toilets, sitting tubs and sinks with nickel hardware. Smooth, hard, and white surfaces were chosen because they were considered sterile. White-glazed porcelain tile was installed on the floors, in shower basins, and on the walls. White Carrara marble slabs were the preferred choice for counter tops. Cabinetry and trim work were painted in high-gloss white paint. If the walls were not tiled they were usually painted white. Rarely a pale color was introduced as an accent. More commonly black accents created a pattern or a border in the hexagon mosaic tile floors or the subway tiles on the walls. Recessed medicine cabinets and vanity cabinets provided storage. Linen storage was provided near the bathrooms in hallway built-ins. The light fixtures were surface mounted on walls and ceilings and matched the polished nickel of the plumbing hardware.

As for the loo, originally just high-tank toilets were available, but due to rapid progress in the redesign of the toilet, a low-tank version was created and both were readily available. Tanks were metal lined and made of oak, ash, cherry, walnut, and sometimes mahogany. The high-tank toilet was a popular choice until WWI and then the ceramic toilets we are familiar with became the standard.

### Awash in color

Functionality gave way to aesthetic appreciation in the beginning of the 1930s. The style of the '30s is called Deco and introduced geometric shapes and patterns as well as colors such as sea foam green, pink, pale yellows, and robins-egg blue. Ceramic or glass tile was the dominant choice for wall, floor, and counter surfaces. It was during this time that color was introduced into the plumbing fixtures and they tended to match the color of the tile and the walls. Often the main color was accented either with black and/or one other color, which created bright and dramatic effects. The shape of the tiles used on the walls and counters tended to be square tiles either straight run or on the diagonal. Accents were created by narrow bull-nose tile or diagonal cut tile. Glass tiles on the walls achieved a beautiful jewel effect. On the floors the mosaic tile changed to larger hexagon mosaic tile, multi-colored squares and rectangles or linoleum. Vanity cabinets and counters had rounded corners. The cabinets were mainly built of wood but sometimes they were made of painted metal. Chrome was introduced for the hardware. Often handles for faucets, door and drawer knobs were made of pale pastel-colored glass. Chrome medicine cabinets with integrated sidelights, hidden toothbrush storage, and recessed toilet paper holders were fun accessories.

### Privy to the past

When remodeling or creating a bathroom in the styles of the first four decades of the last century a couple of approaches can be taken. The first is the purist's approach, in which case the number-one point of caution is to keep current codes in mind. There are many sources for antique light and plumbing fixtures that sell refurbished items but there are also places that will sell you salvaged product in its dated condition. Light fixtures have to be rated for damp locations and plumbing fixtures have to comply with current codes. They have to have pressure balance valves, mixers, and have to meet clearance requirements. Also venting and current electrical has to be provided in the remodeled space. Having to deal with the challenges of installing an antique toilet for example can be quite extensive but rewarding. There are shops that specialize in resurfacing tubs, toilets, and sinks. The new surface on a plumbing fixture will never be as durable as the original but will make the fixture look beautiful again.

The glazed hexagon mosaic tile for the floors of that time is hard to come by. The glaze used to be of a thinner consistency and created a flat surface. Today the thicker glazing inherently creates a slight bevel. Unless one can find salvaged tile that is still in good condition the tiles will look different. If a bathroom has the original tile, cleaning the grout and living with a few imperfections is the best choice. Subway or other ceramic tile or glass tile for the walls is easy to come by. Differences in glazes, shades and shapes between the new and the old will be apparent but are minor. Glass tile is becoming very popular again and is readily available in beautiful colors and shapes. Cabinetry that is true to style and fits within these usually small spaces generally has to be custom built. Due to the popularity of the "bungalow" bathroom medicine cabinets and small storage cabinets can be purchased pre-made.

The second approach to creating a bathroom in the styles of the first part of the 20th century is choosing products that are new but have been designed with the proportions and details of that time in history. Today most American plumbing manufacturers have a line of antique-looking plumbing fixtures. The Deco style is a little bit harder to come by. One can substitute its clean lines with more modern designs if the finish is either polished nickel or chrome. The same goes for the light fixtures.

It is important to understand that it is not necessary to copy, but that proportions, textures, and colors of a period get incorporated into the design. Unglazed mosaic tile floors are readily available and create a similar look to the original glazed tile. The grout between the hexagon tiles tends to be difficult to keep clean. Using a darker shade for the grout will prevent future stains from showing. Choosing an entirely different material like Marmoleum for the floor or a solid surface for the counter to prevent having to deal with the grout altogether are options that can be integrated into the design. Looking at materials and architectural details that were used in different parts of the home is a good way of knowing what was available and representative of the period.

The older bathrooms tended to be quite small and if there is no opportunity to gain space by adding on or moving walls it might be worth considering replacing tubs with walk-in showers with shower curtains. Also, pedestal sinks were common during the 40 years discussed here. They take up less visual space than a vanity cabinet but provide no storage. The colors of the '30s were beautifully bright but could also be quite oppressive in the small spaces. Sometimes introducing colors in the patterns and accents and keeping the rest neutral can make a space seem larger. A generous amount of mirrors as well as plenty of light will also make a space feel larger.

Researching and recreating these periods is great fun but do not forget to put a personal note in your space.

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