

HISTORY OF MOSAICS
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“Mosaic is a bizarre art form.”

-Roger Ling, *Ancient Mosaics*

What is mosaic?

Mosaic is the art of making decorative images or patterns made up of small components. It requires a great deal of time and labor, and is often very expensive. It seems ridiculous to go through all of that when painting can often achieve the same imagery. However, mosaic is far more durable than painting, so it can be used in places painting can not, such as floors, and light effects can be achieved with mosaic that are impossible with other media.

What materials are used?

The earliest known mosaic materials were small cones of clay pressed into wet plaster. Semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli and onyx, as well as shells and terra cotta were also used. As the art developed, glass, ceramic and stone tesserae were the most common materials, along with pebbles. Modernly, any small singular component can be used: traditional materials, glass or ceramic cast or cut into tiles, plus plastic, polymer clay (such as Sculpey or Fimo), beads, buttons, bottle caps, pearls, etc.

Where are mosaics placed?

The earliest mosaics were installed as floors or pavements, occasionally as walls. Later, ceilings were also decorated. Originally, mosaics were used strictly in an architectural context. Mosaicking smaller, portable items such as panels or portraits is a later development, though there are a few rare instances of items such as icons from the late Byzantine era.

History

The first mosaics that we know of are from what is now the Middle East. Temple columns in ancient Babylon (present day Iraq) had thousands of small clay cones pressed into wet plaster in decorative and geometric patterns. These date from five thousand years ago. From these humble beginnings, mosaic developed into a major art form.

I. The Graeco-Roman/Hellenistic period

Last four centuries BC

Olynthus, Pella, Delos

Highest point of the pebble technique, very refined

Glass and ceramic tesserae began to be used toward the end of the period, as this allowed greater control over the end result

Strips of lead inset to divide areas of the pattern or image

Classical mythological scenes, patterns such as Greek key, waves

First known and named mosaicist, Gnosis (pebble mosaic of a stag hunt at Pella)



Pebble mosaic from Pella, Greece
4th century BC



Pebble mosaic from Pella, Greece
4th century BC

II. The Roman period 1st – 5th centuries AD

Italy

Beginning of use of mosaic as wall and vault decoration

Rome, Pompeii, Ostia

Glass and stone tesserae, no pebbles

Geometrics, especially in borders; sea and river scenes; scenes that reflect Roman life such as games and hunting; unusual images such as the “Unswept Floor” and “Cave Canem.” (Beware of the Dog)

Black and white monochromatic images very popular for public places such as baths, since they were usually cheaper and easier to make



Mosaic from House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii
1st century AD



Oceanus, black and white mosaic, Ostia, Rome
2nd century AD

Eastern Roman Empire

Antioch, Cyprus, Crete

As Rome's influence spread, more workshops were opened

Same materials, many colors; the black and white style is not seen here

Mythological scenes, especially depicting Dionysus; floral and geometric borders; sea scenes. Personifications are common, such as the Four Seasons, Months of the Year, geographical areas and rivers; then abstract concepts such as Life, Joy, Abundance, Fertility, etc.



Drinking Contest Between Herakles and Dionysos
Atrium House, Antioch
Early 2nd century AD



Evil eye mosaic
House of the Evil Eye, Antioch
2nd century AD



Bust of Pyramos River
House of Cilicia, Seleucia
Mid to late 2nd century AD

Northwestern Roman empire

Spain, France and Britain

Many colors; again, no monochromatic mosaics

Though the work remained Roman in concept and character, each area's work was influenced by local tradition

Medallions with patterned borders, geometrics, knotwork, guilloche. Early Christian motifs alongside classical themes. The earliest known mosaic portrait of Christ on a floor is in Dorset, England.



Early representation of Christ
Dorset, England
4th century AD



Geometric floor mosaic
Saint-Romain-en-Gal, France
Late 2nd century

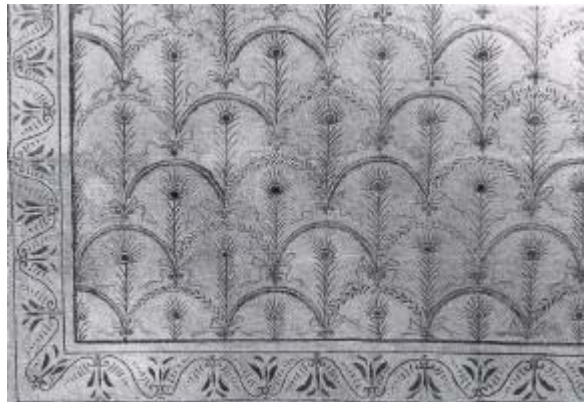
Africa

El Djem, Tunis

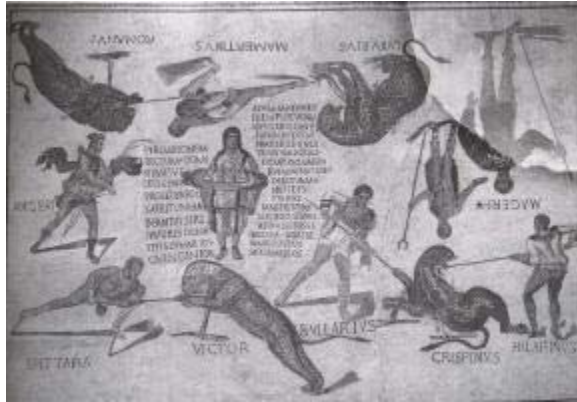
Many colors, no monochromatic work

Floral patterns, classical themes, amphitheatre/chariot scenes, hunt scenes. Reflects the “Romanization” of Northern Africa, especially among the wealthy.

Italian influence in style



Floor mosaic, House of the Dionysiac Procession
El Djem, Tunisia
Second half of 2nd century AD



Ampitheatre mosaic from Smirat, Tunisia
Mid- 2nd century AD

III The Early Christian/Byzantine Era

5th – 8th centuries, considered by many to be the peak of the craft

Improvements in glass tesserae, first use of gold smalti

Heavy emphasis on light and color

Heavy use of mosaic on walls, vaults, ceilings as well as floors

Mostly Christian imagery, images of prominent contemporary figures

Constantinople, Ravenna, Jordan

Works are geographically concentrated, technologically advanced and artistically stunning

Images are not as realistic as earlier Roman work but instead are more stylized to provide narrative



Empress Theodora and her retinue
Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy
6th century AD



Christ as the Good Shepherd
Mausoleo di Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy
5th century AD



Scenes of Christ's Miracles
Church of San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy
6th century AD



Floor mosaic of the Holy Land
Madeba, Jordan
6th century AD



Dome of the Rock
Jerusalem, Israel
7th century AD

IV The Medieval/Renaissance Period

9th – 15th centuries

Practice of mosaic tapering off in most areas besides Italy

Florence, Venice, Rome; also areas under Islamic influence

Almost exclusively glass and gold tesserae

Religious imagery: saints, biblical scenes and story cycles, continues to be very stylized

Islamic mosaic work avoided figural representation but showed floral motifs and Arabic writing, along with geometric patterns

Renaissance artists designed mosaics as well as frescoes, but attempted to make mosaics look like paintings



Flight into Egypt, vault mosaic
Baptistry of San Giovanni, Florence, Italy
13th century AD



King Salomon
Basilica di San Marco, Venice, Italy
13th century AD



Dance of Salome
Basilica di San Marco, Venice, Italy
14th century AD



Christ and the Four Evangelists
Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome
16th century AD

Mosaic work as an art began to decline during the Renaissance; new techniques of painting were being developed and mosaic work was laborious and expensive. It all but disappeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, except in Rome. The Vatican workshops continued to produce thousands of colors of glass tesserae, and miniature mosaic flourished there. Then there was a revival in the nineteenth century, which saw new developments in technique and artistic style. The indirect method was developed, which allowed mosaic works to be assembled off site and installed later. The craft went in many new directions during the twentieth century and continues to evolve today.

Glossary of Terms

Note: Definitions of the following terms often vary among scholars and artists. I have given the most common or least confusing definitions.

Andamento: (pl. *andamenti*) The lines in which tesserae flow, imparting a sense of movement to a mosaic.

Emblema: (pl. *emblemata*) A central panel which was prepared in a different location and then inserted into the surrounding mosaic.

Guilloche: A decorative border with a braid or plait, usually two strands.

Meander: A decorative border consisting of geometric patterns formed by lines processing at right angles to each other. Fret patterns and Greek keys are examples.

Musivarius: (or *musearius*) A mosaicist who worked on walls or vaults. They were paid more than *tessellarii*, since their work was more dangerous (it was not unknown for a *musivarius* to fall to his death from a scaffold).



Meander from the Mausoleo di Galla Placidia
Ravenna, Italy
5th century AD



Opus: Latin for “work.” Now refers to techniques of laying tesserae

Opus circumactum: A technique for laying *tesserae* in fan-like patterns, usually used as a background

Opus musivum: Originally meant mosaic work on walls or vaults (also *opus museum*). Literally, “work of the Muses.”

Opus palladianum: A technique for randomly laying tesserae which are also cut in a random fashion, sometimes called “crazy mosaic” or “crazy paving.” This is a modern technique.

Opus regulatum: A technique for laying *tesserae* in a regular, grid-like pattern.

Opus sectile: A technique in which glass or stone is cut into shapes like pieces of a puzzle and fitted together to form an image. More like stained glass or inlay work than traditional mosaic.

Opus tessellatum: Originally mosaic work done on floors. Now refers to rows of tesserae, laid in horizontal or vertical rows, offset from each other.

Opus vermiculatum: A technique for laying *tesserae*, in which lines follow the curves of a central image or motif.

Smalti: Traditional Italian glass used in mosaics since the Byzantine era (perhaps earlier). The glass is melted down, rolled into a slab and then cut into tesserae. It is fairly irregular and thus very light reflective. Gold smalti can be made by sandwiching a sheet of gold leaf in between sheets of clear or green- or blue-tinted glass.

Smalti filati: Rods of glass that are melted and drawn out extremely thin, then clipped or cut into tiny pieces used in micro mosaics, or mosaico minuto. These were very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Tessellarius: (or *tesserarius*) A mosaicist who worked on floors and pavements.

Tessera: (pl. *tesserae*) A cube-shaped piece of stone, glass or ceramic, used in making mosaics.

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