Hints and tips to becoming a mosaic art connoisseur...

...not all mosaics are the same

A short guide from www.mosaicmakers.co.uk

by Gary Drostle
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The ancient art

The ancient art of mosaic dates back to the earliest civilisations in Mesopotamia some 5000 years ago and reached great heights during the Roman Empire and then again in the Byzantine era. Today there is a new resurgence in the art fuelled by our desire to create new and exciting environments and the demand for high quality and high performance finishes.

Modern mosaics offer us the chance to inject individual character, project style and commitment to quality, and bring our spaces to life. The range of applications for creative mosaics is huge. As well as creating beautiful floors for interior and exterior sites, mosaic can be used on walls, ceilings, free hanging panels and three dimensional sculptures. The organic nature of hand cut mosaic means it can take up any shape and to any scale.

Once you begin to explore the world of mosaics you will discover a wonderful variety of truly fascinating works of art and craft, the discovery of which is a never ending delight. However in the beginning it can be difficult to see the important but subtle differences between mosaics. This short guide will give you a head start in becoming a discerning collector.

Imagine you had Picasso, Rubens and a first year art student all painting the same still life, the results would be very different, and perhaps not all of them good...

The style that the mosaics pieces, known as tesserae, are laid in is equivalent to the brush strokes of a painting and can be just as distinct and individual, the competence with which this is done sets apart the mosaic masterpiece from the simple craft.

One thing I should point out before we go any further is that all the pictures used here are of my own work not because I don’t think there are any better mosaics out there but simply to avoid any copyright problems, likewise all these pictures are subject to International Copyright Law.

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So read on here and begin your journey to becoming a mosaic connoisseur
So what should you look for in a mosaic?

There are three main aspects to consider when looking at the artistry of a mosaic work:

- The laying style or Andamento
- The craftsmanship
- The design

Andamento

The same design can be made in mosaic in many different ways. Traditionally this is called the Andamento, with each Andamento being given a name or Opus, Latin for work. These styles have very different feels and involve differing degrees of skill to execute. The core of the main Andamento styles are the degree of flow involved in the courses of tesserae. Here are the main styles.

Opus Regulatum

Tesserae laid in a regular grid pattern are called regulatum, a special tray is often used for laying the tesserae out so that the tiles are presented ready for fixing on square sheets of paper. Generally speaking bathroom tiling is about all it’s good for as the whole system seems to negate the essential nature of mosaics. However some startling results have been achieved on large scale mosaics, in particular the exchange of computer pixel for tile has produced some amazing photographic mosaics. Regulatum has also been used effectively by Paulozzi at Tottenham Court Road, in London, presumably to reduced the cost of covering such a large area and because the grid pattern fitted with the artists style.

Opus Tessellatum

This style involves using the tiles to form a basic regular pattern repeat, usually the regular brick pattern style which immediately introduces an element of direction into the tile laying i.e. do you lay the brick pattern horizontally or vertically? Other more complicated patterns can be produced by introducing cut tiles, perhaps in the manner of carpet design.

Opus Vermiculatum

Vermiculatum, from the Latin ‘worm-like’ is the most expressive traditional form of mosaic tile laying. The tesserae are laid along the contours of the image, describing its form, you should be able to make a rubbing of the mosaic and see the design. The whole image is given a dynamic power that is unique to mosaics but which is extremely labour intensive and takes a high degree of skill to do well. The essence is to begin with a tesserae size and complete the mosaic in flowing courses of tesserae of that size.

Opus Classicum

As its name suggests this is the traditional style found in many mosaics from the great Roman mosaics of the Levant to the many trade craft Victorian Classical floors that can be found here in England. The technique combines opus Tessellatum with vermiculatum. The main objects of a design are created in vermiculatum and these are placed on a more regular, tessellated, background. Where the two meet the background takes the form of the object, so each object has a background halo around it. This technique creates a very strong sharp and clear image.
**Opus Sectile**  This technique is used extensively in Islamic tile design where it is known as ‘Zillij’. The tiles, usually larger glazed ceramic tiles or stone are cut into shapes that describe the form, i.e. an eye shaped tile would be used as an eye. This usually has a great effect on the tile size to design scale, requiring relatively larger tiles. The technique is closely allied to marquetry.

**Opus Palladianum**  This technique gives a more modern feel. The tesserae are cut into haphazard shapes and laid like crazy paving. This buzzing texture is also used for backgrounds but is labour intensive if done well.

**Modern Mosaic**  more and more mosaic is being seen as a true art medium in it’s own right rather than a more permanent form of painting. This has brought with it an appreciation and emphasis on the qualities that set mosaic apart. These modern style mosaics use tesserae of differing sizes, heightening texture and the dynamic flow of the work, works often have highly textured surfaces. Modern mosaics also use optical colour mixing, and the use of different hues in a field to heighten the mosaic qualities.
Craftsmanship

And so we come to Craftsmanship. These are the skills built up through years of practice and to those new to mosaic art can be difficult to see. Here is a simple eight point list that will reveal to you the secrets of the craft so that you can become a true mosaic connoisseur.

Look out for the following 8 points to spotting a well crafted mosaic...

The Good Points

Even grout lines  The lines formed between the tesserae are as important as the tesserae themselves, even sized grout lines are a sure sign of a well crafted mosaic. Triangular grout areas are an indication of poorly cut mosaic.

Flowing courses  Back again to the idea of brush-strokes, a mosaic master will use the courses of tesserae to form flowing lines which help describe the design irrespective of the colour of tesserae.

Attention to edges  The edge where a mosaic meets the outside world is a critical area. Well made mosaics will usually finish with a border or course of whole tiles to bolster edge stability.

Twinkling tesserae  The use of different shades and hues to heighten an area of plain mosaic adding texture and vibrancy.

The Bad Points

Rivers and Ladders  These are common mistakes by amateur mosaic makers. Ladders are formed when courses of tesserae, say running right to left, start to line up top to bottom, giving a ladder like look. Rivers often occur where courses of tesserae are turning corners and the grout begins to line up at 90 degrees to the flow giving what looks like a crack across the mosaic.

Popping Grout  Holes appearing in the grout when it is dry, caused by the use of too much water in the grouting stage.

Cut tiles at edges  Small cut tesserae along the outside edge causing ragged edges and weakening the vital border between mosaic and outside world.

Lipping  Particularly important on floor mosaics this is where an edge of a tessera does not sit flush with the surrounding tesserae. This only counts if it’s in an isolated patch and should not be confused with the deliberate angling of tesserae to create texture and light effects on wall mosaics.

Mosaic aesthetics

Which materials are chosen to create a mosaic will bring their own aesthetic dimensions to the art and it’s appreciation. Mosaics can be made from: Glass including vitreous glass, art glass, glass smalti and gold and silver smalti; Stone including pebbles, marble and slate; Ceramic including porcelain, glazed ceramics, broken crockery and hand made ceramics; Re-cycled materials.

Texture

Wall mosaics created with natural materials such as slate, marble and stone often use the textures of the materials giving a rich dimension to wall and panel mosaics. Tesserae can be placed on their side to heighten this. Hand made tesserae also often have textured surfaces that add their own unique quality. Hand made Glass Smalti has a rich textured and reflective surface.
Tesserae scale
The size of tesserae used in a mosaic will alter the feel of the image, classically the size of tesserae is chosen in relation to the detail and size of the image so that the most efficient cuts can be made. Below you can see the effect on a curve, left to right: the right size; too big; too small.

Natural materials and some man made materials offer a wide range of tesserae sizes, in modern mosaics these can be mixed and used to create a mosaic with a very expressive Andamento.

Light
Light plays an important part in mosaic art, particularly with the textured and glass tesserae. No where is this more evident than in the use of Smalti, this beautiful hand made lead glass has a unique quality under light and the tesserae are often placed in the setting cement at different angles to control and add to the play of light across a wall mosaic. Traditionally the gold smalti of Byzantine churches was angled in it’s setting bed to achieve greater reflectivity enabling a single candle to light up a vast interior.

Grout
Many panel and internal mosaics are not grouted, however floor and exterior mosaics, and any work that needs extra protection will be grouted and so the colour of the grout then has an important effect. There are a number of colours available but generally the best colour is a dark grey or black. Other colours must be chosen with great care. For most mosaics white grout is not used as it has a shattering effect on the whole design. The only exception to this is Pique Assiette, work with broken crockery, where that same shattered effect is often desired.

As with any artform these ‘rules’ are only the foundations. Accomplished mosaic makers may bend or break these rules to great effect, but the tried and tested foundations of this ancient craft remain at its core.

Design
Of course whilst mastery of the craft of mosaic can produce the most beautiful work, even becoming a work of art simply by the force of it’s mastery, it is original design combined with this skill that will really create a ‘work of art’. The real mosaic artworks are designed by their makers, the creative activity carrying on from the original design into the physical creation of the work. There is a tradition in the mosaic world of artists designing works and then mosaic craftsmen fabricating the work, and whilst many of these works can be truly amazing, in my opinion they do not have that spark that a mosaic artist brings to a work.

A mosaic’s design is as individual as the artist who creates it, mosaic artists have as many different voices and different things to say as modern painters.
Mosaic Art Glossary

Andamento The term to describe the style or rhythm of laying tesserae.

Cartoon Full size drawing produced for the mosaic.

Course A line of tesserae.

Direct method Method for making mosaics by fixing directly into cement to the final surface.

Emblema The fine feature mosaic panel usually set in a geometric border.

Field An area of tesserae, usually of the same colour.

Filati Fine glass thread used to create tesserae for micro mosaics.

Fully Vitrified Ceramic Extremely low porosity material usually fired at high temperatures to produce an impervious, completely resistant to water penetration tile (less than 0.5%) often called porcelain.

Grout Fine cement based mix used to fill the interstices.

Guilloche Knotwork border pattern typical of Roman Mosaics.

Hammer & Hardie Traditional tool for cutting tesserae consisting of a sharpened hammer and a chisel set in a wooden block, pictured opposite.

Indirect method Method for making mosaics by fixing to a temporary surface before transferring and fixing the completed mosaic to the final site.

Interstices The network of gaps between tesserae.

Keystone Technique for curving a course of tesserae.

Millefiori Rods of glass formed into decorative patterns sometimes used in mosaics.

Opus Pl. Opera To denote work style.

Opus Classicum The classical Roman style of laying mosaic where a finely cut object is surrounded by a regular background field.

Opus Regulatum The square grid pattern of standard tiling.

Opus Sectile The style of cutting and adjoining shapes in mosaic, similar to that in wood marquetry.

Opus Tesselatum Creating simple patterns in mosaic from the various brick patterns to other geometric patterns usually without any tile cutting.

Opus Vermiculatum The fine mosaic work using course of tesserae to describe the form, literally ‘worm like’.

Ostia Style Style of black and white mosaic typical of the ancient Roman port of Ostia.

Pique Assiette (Picassiette) Created with broken crockery.

Porcelain see Fully Vitrified

Riven Showing the rough cut edge of the tessera to add texture to a mosaic (usually marble)

Smalti Hand made enamelled opaque glass tesserae.

Tessera The mosaic cube or tile pl. tesserae

Unglazed ceramic Extremely high fired durable dust pressed ceramic tile in which the colour pigment runs through the body of the tile, also called Porcelain or Vitreous Ceramic.

Vitreous Glass Machine pressed glass tile.

Zillij The Islamic style of mosaic with formed geometric shapes.

If you would like a quotation for your own unique mosaic work of art or would like to visit the studio you can e-mail me at gary@drostle.com
Gary drostle
art for landscape & architecture

40 Strand House
Merbury Close
London
SE28 0LU
United Kingdom
TEL: +44 (0)20 8316 7734
E-MAIL: gary@drostle.com
MOB: +44 771 952 952 0

2006 – Gary has been awarded the prestigious Queen Elizabeth Scholarship for Crafts from the Royal Warrant Holders Trust

2006 – Queen Elizabeth Craft Scholar, Royal Warrant Holders

2006 – Building Better Healthcare Awards, Part of the ‘Best’ Art in Health Facilities

2008 – ‘Best Architectural’ Award, Mosaic Arts International 2008, Miami

2007 – The Rouse Kent Awards for Public Art

2007 – RHS Chelsea Flower Show, Silver Medal - Garden with Roman Mosaic

2006-2008 – President of the British Association of Modern Mosaic

2006 – Bexley Civic Society ‘Charles Burr Award’ for environmental improvement

2006 – Queen Elizabeth Craft Scholar, Royal Warrant Holders

2006 – Building Better Healthcare Awards, Part of the ‘Best’ Art in Health Facilities

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