

A Short History of the Mosaic or Everything You Never Knew You Wanted to Know!

By Lynette MacLeod

Consider this. In two thousand years how many of us would want to be reading a treatise about floors and rugs made from recycled soda bottles or petroleum byproducts? How memorable, how enduring would these treatments be for those who follow us? By contrast, when one views the beauty, the designs, the strength, the legacy left us by the artists who created mosaics which served similar flooring purposes, our response is clear. Volcanoes, wars, grave robbers and weather have all tested them but they remain singularly special to us even now when we don't remember the myths and gods portrayed. Mosaics are among the most evocative of the art left us by the ancients and their colonies.

“What are mosaics?” you ask. They are small cubes of colored glass and stone called tessera (the plural is tesserae) installed into a mortar ground then bound with cement. “Tesserae were made from local limestone, marbles, other natural materials, and from glass, providing a rich range of colors for the mosaicist's palette.” (ref.2) The technique first manifested in Sumeria 5000 years ago in the 3rd millenium BCE (Before Common Era), then surfaced in Egypt, the Orient, Africa. Mosaics arrived in Greece in the 5th century BCE and there were periods of perfection with the Greeks, the prolific Greco-Roman era, and the Byzantine stretching to the 12th c. CE. The Romans were, of course, immensely clever with cement hence their ability to build all those colossal structures incorporating mosaics that remain scattered over the landscape of modern Europe, parts of Africa and Asia.

One of the best troves of mosaics was found when an expedition mounted in the 1930's by Princeton University, Wellesley College and other institutions excavated in Antioch in what is today northern Syria. Antioch, one of the four great centers of the ancient world and the only to remain relatively undeveloped in modern times, had accessible less disturbed structures to the delight of modern day archaeologists. The others - Rome, Constantinople and Alexandria – built and paved over their treasures with the passage of time. The effort in Antioch yielded more intact in situ mosaics than most other sites could offer. (ref.2)



Fig. 3



The mosaic artists were able to establish perspective, geometry, storytelling, light and shade. The colors were manipulated to create pictures or “designs ordained by a cartoon or guiding pattern”. (ref.1) Three methods were devised to create mosaics. The first was to lay them into wet cement, the second to place them in sand gluing them with a cloth, removing the cloth and setting it into cement then dissolving the glue, and the third as with the second method was to place them on the cartoon as a template and reverse the cloth. (ref.3) The last sounds much easier, more like painting with numbers! There is a beautiful enormous mosaic floor in an amphitheatre in Lyon, France, which was a large Roman town when France was called Gaul. This floor has so many colors one would think they were artificially created. In fact, the Roman Empire was so farflung, they were able to bring back almost any color of stone required for the artists. The very wealthy were able to afford handmade glass tesserae, wonderfully decorative in brilliant colors, allowing more refinement of depiction. The glass tesserae were more fragile than the stone they replaced so were used in less demanding placement.



As with the major Renaissance artists, the principal mosaic artists would create workshops following the direction of the master who would conceive the designs, possibly do the central theme and allow the subordinates to implement the balance. The work became sufficiently distinguished that their schools can be recognized today. Mosaics encompassed many motifs. The Greeks and Romans employed a central theme called the emblemata fabricated elsewhere and imported to the site to be surrounded by a decorative border. One can speculate that one reason mosaics were used so much by the Romans was because they built their towns with inward facing houses. The mosaics could provide views of interest while maintaining privacy. What’s intriguing for the visitor to an ancient site is that we can guess the use of the different rooms: water, fish and sea nymphs for bathing, drinking and banqueting scenes for the reception areas,



erotic scenes or deities of love for the bedrooms. And as with current times and human nature, the best quality pieces were placed where the most people could see them.

Mosaics can be dated somewhat by the subject matter. For example, in 3rd-1st c. BCE the imitation of paintings was paramount, in 242 CE, when the Emperor Constantine moved the throne of Rome to Constantinople, the Eastern Mediterranean artists were influenced by the Christian religion adding crosses and churches, those of the 4th – 6th c. CE were noteworthy for hunting scenes, aquatic scenes and vegetables, with decorative naturalistic running scrolls of vines and ivy. Animals were particularly employed, introducing the citizens to exotics including lions, tigers and peacocks. Interestingly, more polychrome figured mosaics were used outside of Rome in the colonies. Mosaics were used in all kinds of applications from houses to temples to baths to churches, synagogues, palaces and even brothels. (ref.4) They were used with exuberance on walls, floors, countertops, anywhere that could be decorated. Even corner fast food markets in ancient Pompeii were embellished with mosaics. Mosaics were not limited to the rich as with so much of the fine ancient art.



Fig. 3

One of the mysteries of mosaics is how can they be removed from their installations and displayed in one piece. Vitruvius, the Roman architect, wrote that there were multiple layers beneath the final topmost layer of mosaic. The preparation would be essential for the integrity of the mosaic. The lower levels had to be exceedingly level to avoid cracking or settling. The latter day individual (for good or ill) must glue a strong piece of canvas to the design, slicing through the layers beneath and turning it over, then creating a strong frame with more cement and metal rods. Mosaics do not respond well to torque.

What can make mosaics so appealing to those of us who didn't grow up in Roman villas is that we can live with this art without fearing for its safety. Relatively impervious to hurricanes, theft (they weigh too much for all but the most intrepid strong burglars) and



damage (they've made it this far) mosaics will probably make it another few millennia. We can put them on our walls, witness Fig. 1, we can make them into tables, see Fig. 2, a rare example with glass tesserae bringing out the colors in the bird. We can put them in our floors and bathrooms. Mosaics can be sublime and monumental, Fig. 3. They can even decorate a wine bottle for a vineyard, Fig.4. Fig. 5 shows a mosaic mounted on a wall next to a pool. At night, downlights reflect it onto the pool's surface.



Fig. 6

Imagine this. A wealthy landowner was fond of a pet and wanted a memento, but didn't have a handy iPhone for a photograph. He had papyrus but that would be too transient. Perhaps a piece of marble, but no, too extravagant. So he commissioned a local mosaic artist. Regard our lovely little goat depicted walking peacefully. He was found in a villa floor possibly in the Orontes Valley, Fig.6. And, all these years later, this charming whimsy can be viewed at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon.

It is necessary when one does choose to venture into the field of collecting mosaics to deal with reputable dealers. To be sure of the authenticity of the piece, it should have a lifetime warranty. Don't expect to find pristine mosaics. Even the finest show signs of ancient damages; sometimes the places are painted over, with others new tesserae have



been added (they are conspicuous by their unscuffed shinier surfaces.) As mosaics do tend to weigh a great deal relative to their size, we would advise you to think about what size you'd like and where you'd like to use it so that you are not presenting yourself with a dilemma. Mosaics lend themselves very well to tables with handsome custom Lucite bases that can accommodate the weight with ease. Once you've established what spot you choose to enhance, then the choice will follow more easily. Good luck with your search.

Ref. Notes:

1. Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University. Vol.40, #2, 1981, p.2
2. "Domestic and Divine, Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysus", Christine Kondoleon, Senior Curator of Greek and Roman Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Cornell Univ. Press, 1995
3. Ancient Mosaics, Selections from the Richard Brockway Collection, presented at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, Fall 2009, Author Director John Olbrantz
4. Richard Brockway, Ancient Art International, Vero Beach, Florida 32963

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Captions:

- Fig. 1 - Collection of Ancient Art International, 3rd-4th CE
Fig. 2 - Collection of Ancient Art International, 4th-6th CE
Fig. 3. - Collection of Ancient Art International, 4th-6th CE
Fig. 4 - Dollarhide Vineyard
Fig. 5 - Collection of Ancient Art International, 5th-7th CE
Fig. 6 - Roman, Syria, 5th-6th CE, Maribeth Collins Art Acquisition Fund/partial gift of Richard C. Brockway, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette Univ., Salem, Oregon