

My Theme is Light.
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Byzantine influence on my Art and how it changed my working life.

The essential nature of the mosaic medium was miraculously revealed to me by an encounter with ancient Byzantine mosaics.

From that moment onwards, I found that mosaic was truly my medium - one through which I could totally express myself.

When I uncovered this secret - it radically changed the way in which I worked within my already chosen medium of mosaic.

You might say - it was a revelation which gave me what I searched for - a personal voice.

Previously, at art college, I had worked principally with sculpture and drawing, vaguely experimenting with both but not getting anywhere in particular.

I chanced upon the technique of mosaic when travelling abroad looking at an ancient Roman pavements in 2nd C. AD Italica in Spain. I was struck by the practical honesty of the medium where 'what you see is what you get.' The small stones or tesserae were cut to size and permanently positioned in a cement mortar. I was entranced also by the great decorative beauty of the medium and most especially by its power to engage. I became fascinated and needed to know more.

As no art college in England at that time accepted mosaic as a fine art medium for study, I taught myself. Mosaic was, and still is, regarded in Britain as an applied art form only - the notion that it could be used as a medium for self expression is still practically unheard of.

I therefore studied mosaic through looking at ancient examples - translating what I saw by 'doing' and travelling where I could around the ancient Greco/Roman Mediterranean world avidly seeking out Classical mosaics to inform and inspire my work.

This search also introduced me to the wide variety of materials I saw in ancient mosaics and allowed me time to learn the techniques of cutting the various traditional materials like

marble, stone and pebbles. Gradually I familiarized myself with the unique cutting tools such as the hammer and hardie, alongside the modern hand-held sping-based cutters. It was an invigorating experience and was to become obsessive.

As my knowledge grew and was applied to my personal work, I began to exhibit the new pieces in galleries and art centres. My themes at this time were the sea, the tree and the human form - imagery which allowed great scope of interpretation allowing me to continue to muse on the metaphysical questions of life like Why are we here? and Who or What are we?

My first mosaics employed the muted palette which I found in the Greek and Roman mosaics, where their colours were naturally occurring ones - including various terracottas, ochres, greys, blacks and whites and other coloured marbles and stone.

And although I have never felt myself to be a true colourist, preferring this muted and limited range of materials, I found new delight in encountering specialist mosaic glass. In particular I was enticed by the colourful hand-made mosaic material, called smalti which was uniquely manufactured in Venice.

I also found gold! Mosaic gold was to be a wondrous addition to my palette, but at this time I used it, just as the Romans did, for highlighting or creating points of focus within a design.

Then, in the mid 1990s, I found myself in the city of Ravenna in Italy, looking at the 6th C. mosaics of the basilica of San Vitale - an exquisite early Byzantine church. I revelled at the rich colouration and mastery of the mosaic work and was particularly drawn to two secular panels, one of the Emperor Justinian and the other of his consort, Empress Theodora. These were glowing panels, rich in figurative and textural detail using mainly the material of smalti but with a little marble for hand and face detailing and mother of pearl for its nacreous lustre in decorative areas - and all positioned on a simmering golden ground.

As I looked, musing upon such wondrous artistry, a glowing beam of sunlight fell across the mosaic surface - immediately dissolving the portrait images into a myriad of light particles. All the figures had, in effect, dematerialized into light. This gave my looking an

enhanced perception forcing my understanding of what I saw to leap into another realm - a deeper one of new insight and comprehension.

I marvelled on this transforming aspect, one I had never experienced before when looking at classical mosaics. I knew with certainty, that it was the light bouncing off the imagery, that had been transubstantiated and had subsequently opened this new way into a greater sense of understanding.

Through light, therefore, I knew that a more profound sense of knowing could be experienced.

This was truly a lightning bolt - uno colpo di fulmine!

The key to this revelation was so obvious. It lay in the very materials used in Byzantine mosaic - namely glass and in particular the metallic golds with their highly reflective surfaces. Surfaces whose greatest qualities are their luminosity and the extraordinary ability to hold and dispell light - very different from the matt surfaces of pebbles and stone used in classical pavement mosaics.

The mosaic masters of this early Christian mediaeval period were expressing their new religious ideas in pictorial form to give expression to the sublime.

They relished experimentation and explored all the potentialities latent within the gold and glass they used. This was essentially a religious art and their function was above all to convey a sacred message. Mosaic was being used to illustrate and embody the idea of a new faith and was to continue to do so extensively throughout the Byzantine period right up until the mid 15th C.

These Byzantine maestros were able to cut and fix the mosaics to vertical walls, cupolas and vaults in great schemes covering the interiors of the new buildings of early Christianity.* The source of their understanding in relaying their sacred message lay in exploiting light - by physically manipulating the specialized materials of gold and smalti

No longer were mosaic tesserae made to lie flat on the ground and be functional and utilitarian, as in the floors and pavements of classical times. On the internal vertical and curved surfaces of the new religious basilicas, the tesserae could be applied at angles into the

mortar to attract and repel light. This tilting of the tesserae was used with great skill and understanding to give the ultimate effect to the viewers. Sometimes, this meant the metallic tesserae were pressed at extreme angles into the mortar** or placed in alternate lines - both away and toward the light source - giving a play of light and shadow.

Accents of brilliant white and yellow golds were seen by the viewers as pinpoints of illumination. Mosaics at this time did not portray a light source within the imagery but relied instead on the moving light from both candles and natural daylight. By utilizing these different sources of light, the mosaic artists could manipulate light so much that it could be made to transcend any imagery completely, through brilliant or even blinding light.

This is what had happened to me...

Experiencing mosaic in this way - through light - especially in a sacred setting, the viewer is enveloped in a transcendental mystery.

I believe the same extraordinary and wonderful effect can be realized in a secular or contemporary setting such as in an art gallery or even within the confines of a personal environment.

Gold was always considered a worthy vehicle to transport Divine ideas in art. This extra element of conveying Light, which the mosaic medium proffered, could give even greater Divine expression or spiritual awareness.

I knew that this way of perceiving mosaic could be utilized by me in my personal work, and at last give me a conduit through which I could truly explore my everyday experience. My meditations on life, love and death could now be translated into mosaic using light as an integral part of the exploration.

It is not easy - it is brutally demanding to be given such a key - a gift which gives me little rest. Mosaic as every practitioner knows is a time-consuming art but now my working day stretches from the early bird chorus often late into the night - for as my experiences multiply - my explorations get deeper. But it is an exquisite gift and allows a continuous celebration of life through light.

My mind has become a labyrinthine repository of things seen, felt and sensed. Each new work explores one aspect of this - a new enquiry into the Absolutes. Sometimes one line of

enquiry needs to be developed in more than a single work, so I often work on more than one piece with the same title.

My oeuvre is essentially abstract - and the title of each work is, for me, integral - a part of its existence. I occasionally say this allows the viewer a 'way in' to the work.

So, my work in mosaic, which started out as an outward looking imitation or expression of Nature has been transformed into one of abstract contemplation. I can now choose what to leave out rather than what to include. I strive to epitomise an 'eloquence of the less.'

It is an never ending exchange between experience and creation.

Footnotes

*Mosaic was also used as the prosyletizing art-form of a second emergent new World faith - Islam. Mosaic workshops based in Byzantium (present day Istanbul) were sent to embellish both churches and mosques. e.g. The 8th C. Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria and the 10th C. Mihrab of the Mosque in Cordoba, Spain.

** The late 9th C. mosaic - Christ and Emperor Leo VI the Wise - in a lunette of the Imperial door of the narthex of the great basilica of Haghia Sophia in Istanbul (Byzantium) has tesserae placed at 30° to the viewer for maximum observance and brilliance.