

The Evolution of Contemporary Mosaic      4. Easel Mosaic  
AIMC : Paray-Le-Monial, France    October 2018  
Elaine M Goodwin

Mosaic ... A difficult word, even within the world of mosaic - it has so many understandings.

For Contemporary mosaic, I am going to dismiss traditional religious mosaic, pastiche mosaic, decorative mosaic, commercial mosaic, ornamental mosaic and functional mosaic, concentrating on mosaic which is created to say something new and personal for our present time.

So to be clear: I shall talk about what I understand to be contemporary mosaic **art**: an art which says something original to us today, art which is personal and expressive and an art which increases our visual understanding. This art is generally, but not always, experienced as easel art,

So what, then, is easel art?

In my *Encyclopedia of Mosaic*, published by Batsford in 2003, I state the following:

Easel Mosaic : "A generic name for a mosaic which is not part of an architectural element that is a wall or a floor. Today many such mosaics are designed and made by a mosaic artist, often being original and very much to the forefront of modern mosaic making"

I think I still stand by this, even if it is a rather over-optimistic definition...

Is easel mosaic an evolution for mosaic?

Well, way back, 800 years ago in the late Byzantine period of the 12th century, there was such a thing as a portable icon. This was an icon or small art work that was of manageable carrying size. Most often they were made of wood, and carried an image of a religious nature on the surface. They were frequently created with great dexterity, and were of special theological importance to the person or the religious order that moved them about from place to place.

Of interest to us here is that occasionally the image was executed in mosaic, often in the form of a miniature, almost micro mosaic, with tesserae that were cut and fixed to the wood with a gum mastic or wax derivative. This technique in itself is not so very different from methods familiar to us today.

So has there been an evolution? I like to think so.

In Byzantine times the role of the portable or easel mosaic was to make visual an aspect of a belief system, a fervently held belief system; that of Christianity. The icon was carried around as a visual manifestation of a religious credo; holding a community together through a well-known image of a saint or a Madonna and child; the easel work being in effect an important bridge between the everyday and Eternity.

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A professional artist today, working independently on a portable or easel mosaic, say for an exhibition, can be seen to be an evolution in one pivotal respect; he or she is working through a personal concept: not one generally held by the masses. It is an original Manifestation, singularly attempting to make sense of the world, understood by the few and not the many. Unlike those of centuries ago.

It is therefore an evolution within the expressive arts, just like painting or sculpture has evolved but that just happens to be constructed under the title of – mosaic – ooooooh, that word again!

Over the past 30 or more years I have often despaired about using this word. – MOSAIC – especially when asked at a dinner party or at some social gathering:

‘Oh, so you are an artist. How wonderful...a painter? No? Oh...a sculptor? No?

‘Oh... mosaic...’ a little pause, then Agh...!

‘I love mosaic. I have a bathroom, a table etc where I have put lovely mosaic tiles...’  
Agh!!!!!!! But then you all know that scenario...

So now I just say ‘artist’, using glass and gold in an abstract way. What a mouthful when I should be just able to say mosaic artist and be understood!

But, if this ignorance of the expressive medium of mosaic is not understood by the average person in the street, it is much more inexcusable when it is misunderstood by curators of art galleries.

As many of you know, I am an artist who tries to make a living using the medium of mosaic. It is my only work and I have been trying to sell my work for well over 30 years now; mainly easel pieces, through art gallery exhibitions. It has been *extremely* difficult...

First of all, GALLERIES. Questions such as. ‘oooooh are they heavy?...ah...my gallery walls are rather fragile...’ ‘Do they have a frame? And how are they hung? Besides which I really don’t have a clientele for these sort of works...’ ‘You understand it will be so very difficult for me to sell them...’ And so on and so on.

Rarely a gallery curator will just take the plunge and exhibit the work because he or she actually likes what they see and gets excited about exhibiting the work, and when they do, they are surprised and delighted by the positive reaction of the public. – who are thrilled at being shown something new, exciting and, at its best...quite amazing!

Worst of all for me in England was the attitude of the ex-Director of the Tate Modern Gallery in London who, without bothering to even look at the work, dismissed mosaic as being merely an applied craft and suitable only for The Victorian and Albert Museum; a favourite place of mine for sure, but one that deals with the decorative arts not with works of contemporary abstract expression... Obviously his narrow vision had no room to be expanded by taking a look at a contemporary expression for the medium. If he had, he might have been enlightened...

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I did try very hard in England to create a unified foundation for mosaic; one which would display the many and varied facets of the medium. So, nearly 20 years ago in 1999, I founded, with a group of enthusiastic colleagues, a mosaic organization called BAMM. The British Association for Modern Mosaic: an association which indeed keeps going from strength to strength, but which, in my opinion, has only a whisper of a voice for contemporary expressive mosaic. The strengths of the organization seem to me to lie in the decorative power of the mosaic medium. The work produced by the members is often strong, colourful and ornamentally inventive, characteristics which seem to continue to get stronger and stronger... But... in my view, truly contemporary work as an expression for an aspect of our time, it is not.

So now I am in France, where the understanding of contemporary mosaic seems more advanced. I am sure that this is due, to some great extent, to an enlightened teacher of mosaic, Ricardo Licata, who was Professor of the Studio of Mosaic at the National School of the Fine Arts in Paris from 1961 - 1995. He died in 2014 and left a strong understanding of mosaic with his students, whom many of us know and love. – Verdiano Marzi, Henri-Noël Aubry, France Hugué, Jerome Gulon, Giovanni Galli, Joël Barguil among others – artists who in turn are passing on their great knowledge to a younger generation of artists who work expressively with mosaic materials. Paray-Le-Monial is a prime example of one of the many centres for the medium in its modern aspect, here in France.

What of the future for easel mosaic?

That I am not so sure of, I can only continue to play my small rôle for the medium in the one aspect I know and love... expressive contemporary mosaic.

In March 2016 I left my beloved England and moved to France; a very special area of France, where the wine flows like water and the warmth of the people and their cultural understandings are profound: Burgundy. In November of that same year I opened an art gallery to permanently exhibit my work and where I also invite other artists, mostly mosaic artists, to exhibit alongside me.

I continue to work daily, experimentally, trying to find answers to my questioning of Truths. My larger easel works are now more frequently exhibited as diptychs or triptychs, or even quadriptychs..., as anything larger I now find seriously less portable!

You can see for yourselves, when you visit my gallery in France.

I look forward to welcoming you.