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**Autor:** Rousseau, Irene  
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# Ancient Medium, Modern Consciousness

Irene ROUSSEAU

Through mosaic art we embark on a journey of geometry, mythology, decoration, and technology. We discover the rhythms of life as we perceive the motion of form and understand its "significance". Flaubert called it the "idea" of a work, and Clive Bell named it "significant form". From prehistoric times through the classical Greek era, and from the ages of Christian and Byzantine art to the computer experimentation of today, we discover a mind-body totality as mosaic art continues to develop from the ancient to the new.

Art is universal. It is a process of creation, interpretation and communication. It is the artist's private and emotional response to the human condition, which he converts into a visual form. His personal organization of form in a particular way reconciles a larger societal consciousness and transmutes it into a universal visual language. In this way, the synergistic relationship between art and society, transfigured by the artist in a given age, links the ancient art of mosaic with the expression of the new. The process of re-experiencing ancient mosaics in the present day engages the viewer in cognitive play, as he re-interprets the historical context of the visual form, and reconciles the universal organization with his contemporary consciousness.

Ayn Rand, philosopher, writer, and educator, argued that there is a link between ancient and contemporary art; the essential function of art pertains to the nature of human consciousness, in that it depends on sensory, perceptual and conceptual awareness. It is the "sense of life". Although the work of art emerges from the realm of ideas, there is always the ultimate involvement of the senses : form, color, composition and space.

Artistic experimentation with tessellated mosaics has been an ongoing process, but it has not followed a continuous linear path. Rather, it has developed into various intermediate techniques. A fundamental difference in concept defines these techniques : the use of the narrative and the decorative, versus spatial structuring through color and reflected light. This raises important questions for the artist, and is therefore a starting point for an inquiry into originality, replication, the nature of communication, and audience response.

Artists have been drawn to mosaics as both a medium and a technique. The practical nature of the material of stone and glass encouraged their application and widespread use, and the durability of the materials allowed mosaic art to remain virtually unchanged. While scholarly opinion is divided as to the origins of "true" mosaics, some suggest that mosaics originated in the form of games which date back to Asia Minor circa 5000 B.C. Others argue that mosaics may have originated with terra cotta cones, which decorated the facades of Mesopotamian temples and resulted in shadow-play and an illusion of depth. Still others assert that the



ancestors of "true" mosaics were found in the form of pebble mosaics, dated circa the fourth century B.C.

For the artist, another interesting question lies in solving aesthetic problems and depicting them in visual form. The process starts with an invitation to explore an inner destiny and a common experience of the mind, which the artist translates into a visual form. The metaphorical image of symbols serves as a cultural mirror of a particular time.

The "Lion Hunt", a Pella mosaic, is much more than a mere floor covering that fulfills a practical need. It is an artistic response to a private and cultural myth, that of man's destiny and the human condition of vulnerability and fear. Man's destiny is at the mercy of the noble lion, whose strength and ferocity are depicted in stone. Although it is literally a floor mosaic, it is an artistic manifestation as well. The pebbles are sorted by color and size, and separated by metal channels which depict the lion in linear form. As we experience the "Lion Hunt", we recreate the desire and dread, and unmask the hidden meaning ; this reconception provokes our emotional response, and resonates as a communal understanding of a primordial sea. The content is nontrivial and it depicts man's deepest fears.

In the process of communication and re-creation, we rediscover the work's creative expression and "significant form" in its historical and cultural context. In the process of seeing, sorting, and reflecting, we link the ancient art of mosaic with our current reality and consciousness of the new. Throughout the mosaic world, we find thematic representations and mythological themes.

While controversy still exists over the widespread use of pattern books, a strong argument for their use can be made. For an artist, it is an overwhelming task to replicate, from memory, the specific placement of detail with precision: the bulge of musculature ; the distance between folds of drapery ; or the subtle twist of each strand of hair. Therefore, the argument for the existence and widespread use of pattern books seems justified.

Replication and transcription of an original work into a duplicate form poses a philosophical problem for art. Vasari admiringly stated, upon viewing Ghirlandaio's "Annunciation" of 1491, that mosaic art is "painting for eternity". These words literally became the ethos of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Master paintings were transcribed into mosaic art, and this practice still flourishes in mosaic workshops of today. The cartoon for mosaic transcription by Salvatore Monosilio (1759-67), after Raphael's painting "Transfiguration of Christ", is a testament to technical virtuosity in mosaic form. By eliminating the interstices between the tesserae, we experience the development of chiaroscuro as we do in painted form. The fused admixtures of two or more colors of smalti glass tesserae, a technique devised by the Vatican School, provide a gradual transition of value and tone. Mosaic art lost its independence as an artistic medium when transcription became a dominant mode. It was now relegated to replicating paintings in the more durable medium of glass.



Thematic representation of "Christ, the light of the world", a Byzantine influence and a Christian ideal, resulted in conceptual changes in mosaic art. The artistic problems of depicting narrative and symbolic iconography now became problems of structuring space with light, as we see in *Gala Placidia*, Ravenna. Here, the narrative of "Pliny's Doves" shows doves drinking water from the "true faith of eternal life". Mosaics became a vehicle for artistic representation of dematerializing space through the play of light, which would exemplify the religious ideal of a transcendental space. By covering the columns with light-reflecting glass tesserae, placed at varying depths with the rhythm of the hand, the artist allows the viewer to become enveloped by a play of light which "transposes" him into a transcendental space. Aesthetically, the flickering points of light and broken color visually dematerialize the underlying architectural structure and achieve an ambiguous, undefined, and "spiritual" space. By creating form with this visual interplay of light and color, we link the Byzantine mosaic tesserae with the dashes of painted color by Seurat and Monet, and thus with the consciousness of the new.

For artists of the twenty-first century, the challenge of the ancient medium still exists. For her commissioned mosaic murals in a concert hall in Switzerland and a hospital lobby in the United States, Irene Rousseau - much like Michelangelo - extracted a marble block from Carrara caves. Her mosaic murals also employ custom-made colored Venetian glass tesserae cut from smalti glass pizzas. The creative process for the artist remains unchanged. First, there is the idea or the concept, then the deliberation and analysis of the visual form, and finally the communication with the audience in the viewer's response.

Mozart's Sonata in C major inspired the concert hall mural "Allegro-Allegra" (fig. 1). It is not a literal transcription of music, but rather a process of abstraction (fig. 2). In the finished work, visual music is achieved through symbols. The symbolic "inner voices" respond to a shift in intensity and color, such as from light to dark or from yellow to red. Such a shift produces an inner and outer movement visually as harmony and rhythm; point and counterpoint are also visually perceived. Rousseau draws on inspiration from the ancient civilizations of Stonehenge and Avebury, the rhythms of music, and Chinese calligraphy. Her rough-cut smalti glass is neither calligraphy nor notes, but instead provides a visual link between the inspiration from the ancient world and the consciousness of the new.

What lies ahead? In the twenty-first century, efficiency, economy, and computerization will have a profound influence on mosaic art. The handmade tesserae of the ancient medium will be replaced by mass production, where regularity and uniformity rule. The mosaic mural will be programmed and executed by the push of a button or the click of a mouse. Mosaic workshops will still exist, but the many hands of craftsmen will be supplanted by the programmer's hands. For the artist, the ramifications are great. The shift from drawing board to computer screen will replace the pencil with the keystroke, but the fundamental difference in mosaic art will lie in technique. As in the past, the creative idea and original thought will become the work of art. Welcome, twenty-first century - we ancients have arrived!



## DISCUSSION

Federico **Guidobaldi** : Credo che la scuola musiva del Vaticano non abbia rappresentato un momento di insabbiamento dell'arte musiva, ma piuttosto una ripresa di confidenza con essa : infatti poi ha dato ottime espressioni di qualità e di creatività con i micromosaici per i quali oggi si è aperta una sala dei Musei Vaticani.

Irene **Rousseau** : It is specifically the glass mosaics that are used to copy Renaissance paintings and paintings of great masters, that I refer to when I said that it destroyed the art of mosaics. Translating an art work from one medium into another is not an act of original thought nor a creative act.

Wiktor **Daszewski** : Some of the problems you have mentioned, for example the Vatican Workshop imitating paintings did exist from very early times. Hellenistic mosaics are in a way a demonstration of how mosaicists tried to imitate paintings. The question of pointilism also is an old one, very much present in pebble floors which by the nature of the material used (pebbles) are very pointilistic. Ancient artists tried to diminish this effect by introducing continuous contour lines of terracotta or lead.

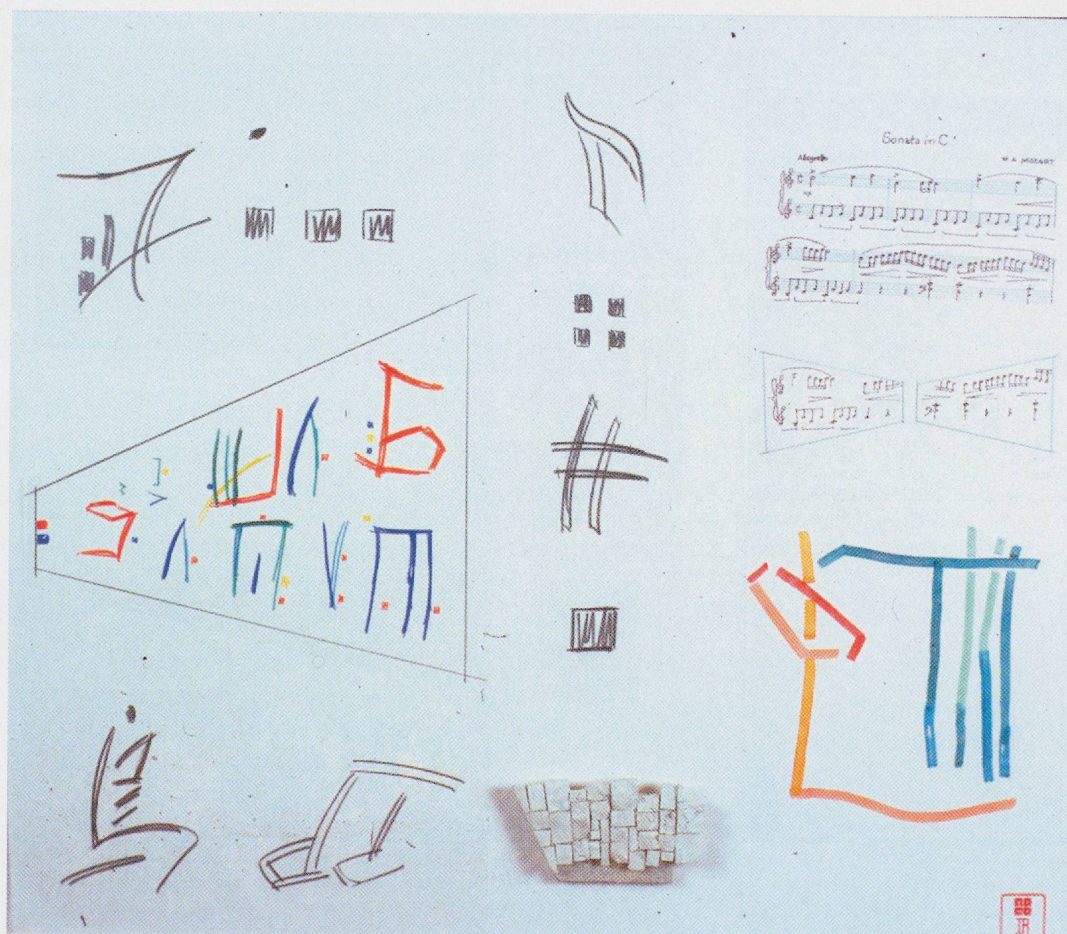
Peter **Fischer** : 1) Are there pizze or squares ? 2) The polished mosaics in Vatican are no longer a priority. 3) In the Vatican mosaic material is melted over a Bunsen burner and becomes something like spaghetti which are then cut into tiny tesserae.

Irene **Rousseau** : 1) Pizza, Smalti Pizzas are still made for the purpose of making tesserae. Square or rectangular shaped glass forms are also made. 2) Polished mosaics were used when stone was employed. Glass tesserae removed the need for polishing. The emphasis was on reflectivity. 3) The Vatican school fuses two colours simultaneously to provide an admixture of colours to allow for a gradual transition of one colour to the next. It functions in a similar way as shading with a coloured paint in a painting.





1. Irene Rousseau, "Allegro-Allegro". Mosaic mural, La Roche, Switzerland (1996).



2. Irene Rousseau, Abstraction for "Allegro-Allegro" (1995-6).



