

Missing Pieces:

The Decline of Mosaics in the Renaissance

Mosaic is an art medium that dates as at least as far back as the second century. Mosaics have been influenced by many things, but their popularity historically as well as now can be attributed to a variety of factors unique to the mosaic format. As long as these factors were emphasized, and the subject and techniques employed to create the mosaics respected these principles, mosaics continued to flourish and practitioners' skill and techniques advanced with the medium. It was not until these basic principles were abandoned and mosaics were instead used to mimic other art forms that mosaics popularity began to wane. This corruption of the "soul" of the mosaic medium almost led to the end of the art form.

Of the many factors that were behind the prevalence of mosaics, durability and water-repellency were probably the greatest. Many of the oldest mosaic examples still in existence today are in remarkably good shape because of these traits. Mosaics could be made from a variety of easily obtainable materials, including cast off or extra construction materials, pebbles, and stone. Often local stone, clay, and other materials were used. (Ling 12) This made mosaics very economical. Some of the oldest examples of mosaics still existing today show that "mosaic floors were popular because they were cheaper and more durable than brick floors." (Rossi 33-34)

In the early centuries, mosaics were commonly employed in the average household. "This was a comfortable middle class which at no time...preoccupied itself with the refinements of mosaic art or required special designs or emblems of its

mosaicists; rather was it content with whatever the local contractor had decided to order from the local workmen.” (Rossi 31)

The climates where early mosaics existed also contributed to their popularity, because the very nature of creating a sturdy and solid “plane” by adhering many individual pieces into a cement or lime base worked to preserve those same surfaces. As the mosaic aged it became progressively more bonded to its base which was often one with the earth. “The wide variations in temperature and humidity which were characteristic of the climate are inimical to the preservation of such work, especially in the case of painted tiles.” (Demus 21) There are still profuse examples of ancient mosaics due this sturdy nature, and the natural preservation provided by collapsed walls and roofs.

Mosaics have also always been uniquely suited to decorating and enhancing architecture, due to the three-dimensional properties of the components that comprise a mosaic. “The ease with which varying the plane of exposure of the various elements would produce brilliant and mysterious effects made this art a natural compliment to that of architecture.” (Anthony 13) The ability to adjust angles of the individual tesserae (or other material) within the mosaic creates an opportunity to highlight the planes and angles of architecture, maximize light reflection, and create dimension and perspective in a way that other mediums can not. With this medium, light is the instrument and the mosaic is the song.

Particularly during the early Renaissance, as the Christian church became the conqueror, patron, and main influence of art and architecture, mosaics evolved from

floor and wall decorations and were adapted to decorate the domed ceilings and arched doorways of churches. "Mosaic forms part of the surface which carries it, and perhaps for this reason has an expressive power more suitable to the monumental complex than other media of decoration." (Rossi 63) Initially, mosaicists retained the respect for the priority mosaic elements demanded, and managed to use mosaics as an effective way of depicting the grand visions of saints, angels, and other holy visions within.

There came a time towards the end of the twelfth century, however, when artists cast aside the basic principles of mosaics, and the purposes mosaics were then put to did not allow for the elemental nature of the mosaic to be the focus. Consequently, mosaics decreased in popularity and the art form almost became extinct.

Around the beginning of the thirteenth century, after a veritable mosaic "heyday", oil painting was gaining more and more popularity. Because of this, artists with backgrounds as painters and mosaicists wanted to dabble in other mediums- and so they began creating mosaics that emulated the oil and portraiture genres and subjects.

As artists of the Renaissance responded to the demand for portraiture and depictions of saints and other human forms, their technical advances and established schools prioritized oil painting as the highest art form, and all others (with the possible exception of sculpture) as secondary. Consequently, the original elements of mosaics were modified in order to achieve the detail and shading effects normally practiced in a painting medium. The most effective way to "blend" the two techniques was to reduce the size of the tesserae. In order to achieve the pictorial

effects the artists now desired, the tesserae were made progressively smaller, until they were “breaking up the tesserae almost to dust”. (Rossi 23)

By making this choice, artists were better able to achieve the effects they were after, but also chose to misuse the materials and corrupt the entire point of the medium. Although skill was required to use mosaics in this way, the artists lost the special visual appeal offered by mosaics alone, and in the end only created a counterfeit “hybrid” of mosaic and painting.

As soon as the fourteenth century, this application led to the decline of the mosaic as its own vehicle of expression. Not only was the art form no longer being created for its own qualities, a trend of specifically copying oil paintings occurred. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Pope had the inspiration to reproduce the ancient paintings in the Vatican via mosaic. As always, when the mosaic medium was exploited in order to copy another art medium, the result was unsatisfactory. “All freshness was lost and replaced by the stale dullness of the copyist; furthermore the enlarging or cutting down of works...led to results which often bordered on the absurd.” (Rossi 82)

Two of the few artists who were semi-successful at blending the techniques of painting and mosaic during the beginning of the 13th century were Torriti and Cavallini. Although successful as mosaicists, they have also been criticized for attempting to “paint with mosaic”, and many modern critics feel something was lost in the translation.

When speaking of Torriti’s work, one critic said “it is a rather solemn composition which has lost much of the spirit of the ancient mosaicists by trying to approach too closely the themes which are commonly depicted in fresco painting.” (Rossi 69)

Another example of this would be Pietro Cavallini-a contemporary of Torriti's. Cavallini was a painter and sculptor who lived during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Cavallini's mosaics are some of the earliest examples of the tendency to treat mosaic as though it were fresco painting. Many feel this was the start of the decline of mosaics.

Others feel Cavallini was the last artist who was even somewhat successful at blending techniques from painting and mosaic work. One contemporary art critic--Guglielmo Matthie--said this about Cavallini's work:

The thousand year old experience and techniques of the great mosaicists were interpreted freshly by Cavallini who was intent on obtaining the effects of fresco in mosaic work. His pictorial technique with its highlights and rapid touches remain that of a painter. He risks a great deal to adapt the techniques of fresco to mosaics without making the results look unnatural. He successfully meets the demands of his objectives without allowing them to overwhelm him.

(Rossi 73-74)

This same critic, however, also said "Although Cavallini's work is of high quality he does not use mosaic with the understanding that its special possibilities deserve. He uses it as if it were fresco painting." (Rossi 69)

Perhaps one of the most interesting things to note about the negative impacts of mosaics being used to mimic other art forms is that the criticism and disfavor was not due to a lack of skill or technique by the artisans.

Historically, whenever mosaic art tried following a different medium—whether by copying paintings during Roman times or imitating the Renaissance style—the outcome was unfavorable. While often these mosaics were examples of incredible technical expertise, the denial of the medium lost the essence of the mosaic because the material became subservient to the image. (King 39-46)

Mosaic work has its own special qualities—durability, longevity, light effects, versatility, and unique dimensional properties. Renaissance artists failed in their attempts to bend the mosaic character to their painting aspirations, and in attempting this, almost caused the death of the art. Thankfully, the unique essence and value of mosaics remained. These attributes have remained constant since their resurgence during the arts and crafts movement, and continue to contribute to the art world today. Mosaics are “chameleons”, constantly changing with the cultural scenery. Mosaic will continue to be a distinctive and important form of art, provided it is always created with an appreciation and respect for inherently being the sum of its parts.

Bibliography

Anthony, Edgar W. "III." A History of Mosaics. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968.

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The author's intent in creating this work, originally published in 1935, was to write a general history of mosaics that was more comprehensive and contemporary than the bulk of all previous existing books on mosaics. His focus is examining mosaics as a stand-alone art medium. His aspiration throughout the book is to establish and discuss mosaics in order to define them from more general discussions where mosaics are treated as a subcategory of art or painting. This book has lost much of its contemporary applicability due to the somewhat dated information, but the author has compiled a good history of ancient mosaics and renaissance mosaics that remains valid.

Demus, Otto. "18." The Mosaic Decoration of San Marco, Venice. Ed. Herbert

L.Kessler. Washington D.C.: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. 155.

The author has made the art in the church of San Marco in Venice a lifelong study. He has a unique view and familiarity due to the intensive study he completed while directing the restoration and cleaning project of the San Marco mosaics. He discusses the original techniques, elements, and artists that created the mosaics during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Demus also provides critical discussion of the attempts to repair and convert the art during the fifteenth century.

King, Sonia. "1." Mosaic Techniques & Traditions. Ed. Hazel Chan. New York:

Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2006. 39-46.

The author has created a volume on mosaics that is a combination of mosaic evolution through history to modern day and a step-by-step do it yourself manual. As the founding member and president of the Society of American Mosaic Artists, she has provided a summary of mosaic history that is appealing and easily understood. The artist creates a visual record of mosaics and their changing styles, and the illustrative photographs are provided in ample amounts that cover a wide spectrum of diverse mosaic applications. This is an essential source for mosaic novices.

Bibliography (continued)

Ling, Roger. "One." Ancient Mosaics. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. 25.

Ling follows the progress of mosaics across the world, from Britain to Egypt and Spain to Syria. He examines techniques, materials, climates and styles, and subjects. He also places the varying periods of mosaics into the applicable political, religious, and geographical context.

Rossi, Ferdinando. Mosaics. Ed. Alfieri & Lacroix Editore. New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970. 23,31,33-34,63,82.

The author, past Director of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, has compiled an extensive and thorough work which covers the history of mosaics up to modern day. More importantly, his focus is the techniques employed during the different periods of mosaic history, and the political influences that affected the art world and specifically the creation of mosaics. This work discusses at length how mosaics are best employed, and strongly criticizes and explores the Renaissance period when the purpose for mosaics changed. The author examines the intents and subjects of the artists before and during the Renaissance and establishes why the altered purposes for creating mosaics led to a great decline in the art form.