

Name: _____

The History of Mosaics

The art of mosaics has a long history stretching back 5000 years. Despite many upswings and downturns in popularity, its appeal has endured. Studying these ancient mosaics offers a valuable connection to the traditions of mosaic art. Many mosaicists of the past were absolute masters. Not only are many of the techniques and materials used then essentially the same today, but there is also a wealth of ideas and inspiration to be found in their work. For instance, the Romans usually worked with a limited palette of colors, yet they were able to create mosaics of incredible expressiveness with stones in a few shades.

Mosaics from the Byzantine era teach us about working with light. For example, when working on vaults in Byzantine churches they pushed gold tesserae into the mortar at different angles to achieve maximum light reflection. My favorite lesson to look for is different treatments of water and transparency created from opaque tesserae.

One reason why we have so many fine examples of historic mosaics to study and learn from is the durability of the materials. Pebbles, marble, and glass create enduring works of art that, unlike frescoes, are relatively impervious to water damage. Another reason for the abundance of historic mosaics is that most of the early mosaics were floors and pavements. When the buildings collapsed, the floors were buried and protected until later excavations uncovered them. When mosaics moved up onto walls and ceilings in later years, they were often in churches that remained in use and were maintained for a very long time.

By 600 BCE, the Greeks were creating floor mosaics. Early pebble mosaics, discovered at Delphi were made of black and white water-smoothed stones used to create geometric patterns in the pavements. Soon after, figural mosaics appeared that were also created from black and white pebbles set into a brown mortar. The introduction of color tesserae did not happen until 300 BCE. Over the next 100 years, the water-smoothed pebbles evolved to cut pieces of stone that ultimately obtained the regularity of cubed tesserae. Around 150 BCE, mosaics from Delos, utilized a broader palette of colors as tesserae of colored glass began to be used. No longer reserved for the elite, the art was accepted and available to middle-class merchants and officials. Mosaics were being used in many rooms of houses.

Notes

How old are the oldest mosaics?

What is a person who makes mosaics called?

Byzantine = Middle East from 330 CE - 1453 CE

How did Byzantine churches create light in their mosaics?

Opaque = not able to see through, not transparent

What do you think *durability* means?

Why do we still have so many examples of ancient mosaics around?

When did Greeks start using color in their mosaics?