

Mosaic Unit

Introduction

Mosaic is a tremendously versatile medium. There is no need to have drawing or artistic ability to enjoy it. Several other disciplines can be integrated to mosaic, most notably math and geometry.

CA Artist Connection

Oakland and Richmond mosaic artist [Daud Abdullah](#) recognized this appeal, and has been making public art for the last ten years. His [Treasure Box Academy](#) teaches people of all ages to create mosaics that become part of Richmond's streets and parks.

Social Justice Concepts

Art should "shift the way we think about the world," but how to do this in a way that isn't prescriptive or worse, considered propaganda? In an art class, you can show the work of artists who have done just that, by making us think about social justice issues. The work of painter [Jack Whitten](#), who worked with mosaic-like textures, evoked just that type of reaction.

Children's Literature Connection

[A is for Activist](#) is the rare ABC book you can use with all ages because of its topic, how people disrupt hegemony. It normalizes such activities in a world where conformism is the norm. *A is for Activist* can be tied to all sorts of media by asking your adult students to create art that visualizes ways in which we can change the world, by asking teens to make a mosaic showing ways to disrupt injustice, and by asking children to make an image of one way their neighborhood can become a better place for everyone.



Jack Whitten, Black Monolith, II: Homage To Ralph Ellison The Invisible Man, 1994. Image licensed for non-commercial reuse.

Duration for Adults: One or several sessions depending on available time.

Adult Objectives: Make a plan for a small mosaic prior to working on a piece.

Duration for Teens: One or two sessions.

Teen Objectives: Complete a small free-form or planned mosaic during class.

Duration for Children: This lesson can be easily carried out over several sessions.

Child Objectives: Complete a small free-form mosaic during class, or a mosaic based on a teacher provided structure.

General Preparation

Prototype: Motivate your students by making a larger, exciting mosaic to show, with the exact materials the students will use. Do it several days prior to class so the glue is dry before you bring it to your class.

For the lesson itself: Small scavenged pieces of plastic, EVA foam, seeds, pieces of sticks, sea glass, and any other small, lightweight, colorful materials that can be glued to a piece of cardboard. Several pieces of cardboard for each student. School glue, small cups for glue, tongue depressors

(optional), and heavy duty, round paper dishes or flat containers for the pieces.

Materials Prep

Your students might have made mosaic before, but it is always important to have patterns available for those who tell you they don't have any ideas, blank surfaces for those who would be bored by completing a teacher-provided pattern, and a planning template for those who worry they might "mess up." Make sure you have enough pieces! This is a very engaging lesson and it is not messy, but requires a lot of scavenging and prep on your part for children to remain engaged. Plan to spend a couple of hours looking for materials and cutting up larger pieces. Get enough flat trays or dishes for each child to have access to at least one tray. Some teachers mix a variety of pieces on each tray or dish and others like to keep each type of material in separate trays. Most important: find a way of quickly storing everything at the end of class.

Procedure for Children

Before the lesson, scope out the storage space where you will be setting the mosaics to dry. After everyone places their name on the back of the piece of cardboard they will be using, begin by showing 2-3 images of ancient mosaics, but don't go overboard on the historical background. It is not even necessary to teach the kids the ancient name for these pieces, *tesserae*. Talk about the materials that were used in the past versus those available today, and move to show the prototypes you made in advance. Spend less than five minutes on this part. The definition of mosaic for children is, "a painting made with many pieces that came from other things."



The first demo should be "how to use school glue in a responsible manner." Whether you give them a bottle or a cup, demonstrate how much glue to use to glue the pieces down to the cardboard. Also, let them know they will not be able to wash their hands until the end of the lesson. Students who need to use the bathroom should always be able to go, but sending multiple children to the sink every time they have a little glue on their hands is logistically challenging.

Allow your students to have an initial, exploratory session making a simple, unplanned mosaic, with the understanding that the second mosaic almost always tends to be planned in some way. Once they are ready to plan a more ambitious piece, you can give them their second demo, "how to plan your mosaic," and show them tools or resources they can use.

Procedure for Teens and Adults

As artists, we sometimes forget not everybody is "visual." Teens and adults understand mosaic is an ancient technique and while you are talking about it some are thinking of ideas to put in practice. But most need help visualizing the possibilities of the medium. You can help them get ideas by showing them several 5-10 images of mosaics made with a variety of materials. You can use a projector, flash an iPad or show images mounted on board.

Some students might be afraid of "ruining" a mosaic board. You can scaffold the experience for them by giving them a board that already has some kind of pattern or simple line image on it that they can follow in order "to practice." This lowers their anxiety and gets them to feel successful enough to take some risks on their next mosaic. You might want to do this with the whole group, depending on how things look.

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Discussion for Children

Viktor Lowenfeld is the author of *Creative and Mental Growth*, a book that became the bible of art educators after WWII. He wrote that "the goal of introducing children to the world of art is to help them to become perceptive and sensitive viewers of the works of art they will encounter in their lives." If this is true, that means the best time to see



more mosaic images is after the lesson ends, when children have had their first experience with the medium. Lowenfeld recommends follow-up questions like "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "What makes you think that?" in order to validate the children's observations and "allow the children to support or revise their answers based on their observations of the work." If you would like more details on his methods, read *Looking at and Talking About Art With Kids*, a PDF available on the web.

Discussion For Teens

Mosaic works as a "soft" introduction to abstraction for teens in that most of the

images produced by your students will bear some resemblance to things that can be recognized, but are, at the same time, abstract compositions with flat colors and a hierarchy of shapes. Out of Viktor Lowenfeld's extensive bank of questions, I have pulled out the ones one might use to look at abstract or semi-abstract works:

- What is the first thing you notice in this mosaic? Why do you think it stands out?
- What else do you see in this mosaic?
- What can you tell me about the colors in this mosaic?
- How would you describe the shapes in this mosaic?
- Why do you think [*classmate's name*] chose this design?
- What will you remember about this mosaic?

Rather than rush through this reflective examination of what was produced in your class, announce that you will devote it the time it deserves during the following session, then carry through with your promise. The answers to some of these questions could be written on a post-it as a warm-up, but at least a couple should be for the whole group so that students benefit from hearing what their classmates think.

Discussion With Adults

The expectation of discussing their classmates' mosaic might make some people slightly uncomfortable because some designs made in your class will be a bit abstract. When there is nothing to identify, some people get confused.

Those who did not go to college, or those who studied something other than liberal arts might feel out of their element. Lower the affective filter by saying that art is often a non-verbal experience, therefore we look inward and pay close attention to the sensations, memories or feelings a piece brings up. Ask them to support their insights with observations by asking open ended-questions "how do you know that?" "what clues do you see in this mosaic that give you that idea?" or "what do you see that makes you say that?"



Another way to bridge this gap is to help your students focus on form, color, line, texture, pattern, composition and process by asking specific questions that require them to observe their classmates' work. When you do this, it is good to ask the students to preface every observation with the stem "I noticed." This stem helps us stay away from value judgments and focuses us on what we actually observe: "*I noticed each tree was a dot of green.*"

Sometimes I ask the students to interview each other. The way I like to do this is to ask the student who made the piece we will be discussing to respond to questions her classmates have written on index cards. The

student read the question out loud and then responds. The first time, I give them a bank of questions to choose from, so they can get the hang of crafting art-related questions:

- If you are finished how could you tell you were done?
- What is the mood of your mosaic?
- How did you decide on this idea? Walk me through your process?
- What about these colors made you use them in your piece?
- What was easy and what was hard about making this piece?
- Now that you are done what are you happy with?
- How did you like mosaic as a medium?