

## DISSOLVING INTO LIGHT

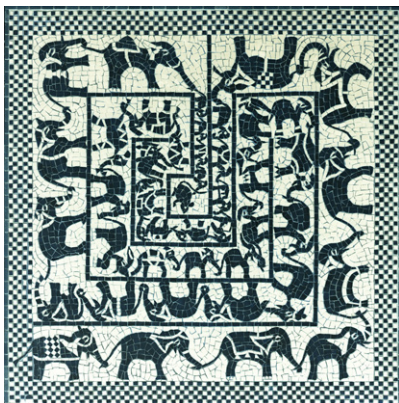
The Creative Journey of Elaine M. Goodwin

Elaine M. Goodwin talking to Ilona Jesnick

Elaine M. Goodwin is an internationally recognized mosaic artist. Her work is found in galleries throughout Europe and beyond; she has exhibited regularly since 1990 in Britain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and elsewhere. One of her most famous public commissions is the *Liquid Gold* triptych of 2001 – the pyramid and mosaic pavement in the Mediterranean Biome of the Eden Project in Cornwall. She is the Founder President of the British Association of Modern Mosaicists (BAMM) and a member of AIMC (the International Association of Contemporary Mosaicists). With Dugald McInnes, Lucio Orsoni and Toyoharu Kii she founded TE21, a conceptual association of international artists at the forefront of mosaic. She has curated two major mosaic exhibitions, including the touring Millennium exhibition *Mosaic a*

*Living Art*; she has held master classes and given lectures internationally and has written six books on mosaic history and technique, to “teach the medium to a growingly interested public. They were fun and allowed me to explore widely around the medium.” Hence the founding of BAMM in 1999: to raise awareness of mosaic and gather together practitioners, professional and amateur, and interested public. BAMM was founded around the dining table of her Exeter home with Paul Bentley, Bob Field and Les Clifton, all previous students of her London mosaic Summer Schools.

Elaine trained at Exeter College of Art & Design, originally studying sculpture. The photos show plaster forms with the same sinuous line that characterises her later mosaic work. “I met Arthur Goodwin [Vice-principal



Top: Elaine M. Goodwin, *Lacuna 1*, glass mosaic.  
2. Elaine M. Goodwin, *Ganesh Goes Walkabout*. Ceramic mosaic, 1985.



3. Elaine M. Goodwin and Group Five, *Days of the Week*, John Stocker School, Exeter, 1991, detail: *Monday*.



4. Elaine M. Goodwin and Group Five, *King William Street car-park mural*, detail. Exeter, 1992.

at Exeter College], my first husband, when I was an art student at Exeter. He greatly encouraged my early creative imagination and we travelled extensively together, most often with sons Rama and Darius Alexander. [Arthur] was an established artist, author, painter and mosaicist. I collaborated with him on his book *The Technique of Mosaic* and it was he who introduced me to the art of mosaic making. I took to it as a duck to water! As no-one was teaching mosaic at this time I learned by looking and making, travelling around the world to see Greco-Roman mosaics, Byzantine and the Naïve.” A study of Ancient Roman mosaics taught her much about technique, she says. “I became ever more immersed in the medium and would own up to it becoming an obsession. A number of books followed to relate my findings and to inspire enthusiasm for the little known medium in others.

“Nek Chand Saini came to Exeter Art College in 1982 at the special request of Arthur Goodwin. Together we had met him in India just a few months before and were entranced by his creation of the *Rock Garden* in Chandigarh, India. I invited him into my studio where immediately and with a beatific smile, he started to create a mosaic in the garden outside – made out of studio ‘finds’ including camel bones & precious china! (I still have a small part of this.)

“As a consequence, he then invited me to work in his garden in India. So as his guest the following year in 1983, I began work on a large mural in his *Rock Garden* – an homage to it. It was an extraordinary, exhilarating and

marvellous experience which was to inspire my subsequent mural work in Exeter.”

In Nek Chand Saini’s famous 25-acre *Rock Garden*, recycled and scavenged materials were used – the debris of modern city life – to create his vision of a kingdom for contemplation. It was in India that Elaine made her first exterior mosaic murals, starting in Chandigarh then in New Delhi and Baroda. She recalls: “Back in Exeter, from 1985-1997, I worked one day a week throughout the following years with my wonderful Group 5 (Glen Morgan, Eve Jennings, Sue Sims, Rhonwen Vickers and Liz Badger), on fourteen city murals.” Elaine, with her team, employed the techniques and ethos learned in India to create, between 1985 and 1995, a series of large outdoor murals for schools, car parks and public places. Their mosaics in a primary school (Cowick Street First School, 1985-6) and a community centre (Tin Lane Community Centre, 1987-9) led to the commission from the City Council to improve Exeter’s forbidding public spaces, in particular their car parks. Subjects were drawn from the city’s history and its landmarks with local residents contributing their broken crockery, their ideas and their memories to be embedded in the mosaics: true community memorials. Local businesses and institutions contributed to the costs, supplied materials and refreshments. The murals are celebrated in a booklet published by Exeter City Council



5. *King William Street mural*, detail. Ceramic, china shards and mixed media.





6. Elaine M. Goodwin and Group Five, *Endangered Species Mural*, Newtown School, Exeter, 1993. Detail: *Cobra*. Ceramic, 'picassiette' shards.

called *Discovering Exeter 9/Community Mosaics*.

"In June 1997 Nek Chand and his family came to visit me in Exeter and saw many of the mosaics. He declared that, 'walking around and seeing the work that was inspired by me, made me feel as though a thousand miles away I had walked into the *Rock Garden*' – a truly heart-warming appraisal."

"I know the murals to have themselves inspired a wave of mosaic making, particularly in schools and parks; I frequently receive emails and 'phone calls to this effect. Some of the Group 5 murals have been moved and re-sited. One, the *Animal Farm* mural, was moved at colossal expense to the site of its new school. I have a CD of the move...spectacular! Three further works: *Broadwalk House* and the two *City Wall* murals were relocated to the heart of Exeter in its major refurbishment a year or two ago. I haven't seen the first although I am assured it exists. The car-park at King William Street, now under the ownership of John Lewis and decorated with a Group 5 mosaic mural, was voted car park of the year earlier this year (2013)". Created in 1995, it shows scenes adapted from the Bayeux Tapestry and incorporates car hubcaps. "*The Pigeon* mural was cleaned and given new lighting this year – and so the life of these mosaics continues."

Although there are some reflective materials embedded in Elaine's solo Exeter mosaic – a depiction of a fountain inspired by Roman and Byzantine imagery, set in a car park which cuts the Roman wall – her materials at this time were picassiette and ceramic, used for public



7. Elaine M. Goodwin, *Quiescence*, 2003. Glass, granite.

and mural work as she says: "in the spirit of Chartres" – referring to the extraordinary Maison Picassiette constructed by Raymond Isidore in Chartres between 1938 and 1964. He covered his entire house and garden and all the objects therein, including his bed and tables, in recycled materials. But, Elaine says, even when working with shards of broken crockery on the Exeter murals, "I did manage to sneak in the odd tesserae of gold – where relevant".

Another theme deriving from her stay in India, which was to have a lasting influence on her imagery, was the mandala and the maze or labyrinth pattern, early on combined with her interest in trees and mythological images. Of the mazes, she says: "[They] were essentially a teaching tool ... a wonderful visual with



which to develop understanding of mosaic – by the repetitious cutting and placing; the absorption as you work into the exponential growth of the image; the understanding of the characteristics of the chosen materials as they are used. This, much in the same way, I'm sure, as intrigued Ancient Roman mosaicists who favoured the maze image. And, of course, conceptually too, it was a journey of discovery from a definite beginning to an end – which is often, in its essence, meditative. Maze imagery complemented this need for contemplation. Painting was too spontaneous – terrifyingly quick!”

Then Elaine was struck with an extraordinary revelation which changed everything about the way she worked. “In the early 1990s, I uncovered a Byzantine secret which provided me with the possibility of creating a truly personal voice. Working in mosaic since the 1980s, I knew of its attraction as a wondrously decorative medium and its beauty and durability as a functional one, but I had not fully realized its power as a medium capable of producing spiritual awe and personal insight.

“I was in the city of Ravenna in Italy, studying the Byzantine mosaics which embellish the presbytery of the 6th century Basilica of San Vitale, when a shaft of sunlight fell across and enveloped the surface, revealing an area made up of a myriad of light and dark particles – and my perception was transformed. The actual mosaic image I was looking at had, in effect, dematerialized into light. This gave me

a far deeper insight into what I was seeing. The images had been transubstantiated, taking my understanding into another realm. I knew immediately that this way of perceiving mosaic could also be achieved in my own work. The key to unlocking this deeper response was simple: it was the very materials used in mosaic which had the ability to both hold and disperse the light. So, the shifting light which I saw ripple across the surface of a Byzantine mosaic owed its life to the materials of which the mosaic was made. And, it was the Byzantine maestros, who relished experiment, who had discovered this latent potential in their materials – which can turn an image of Paradise into a paradisiacal experience.

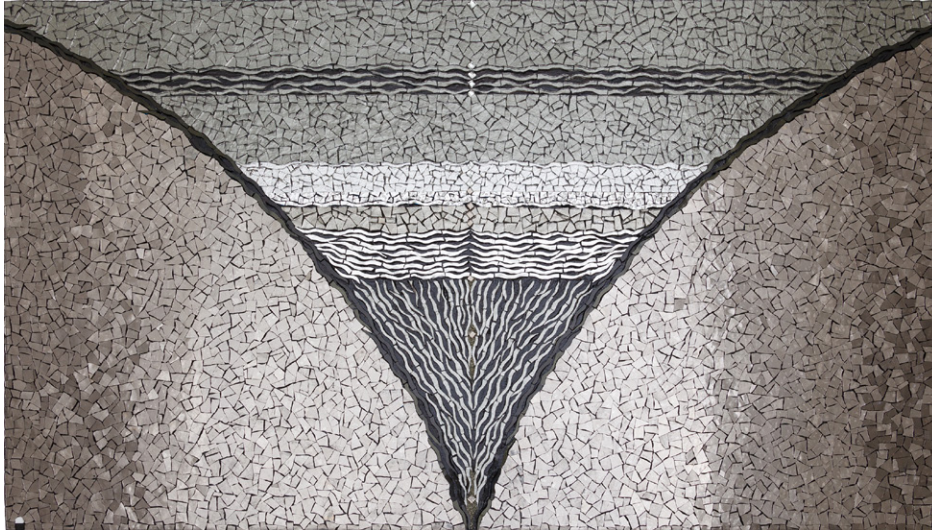
“Byzantine mosaics were made of two specialized, hand-made glass materials called smalti and Venetian gold leaf glass. The tesserae were pressed into a setting of mortar at diverse angles – and it was the technique of manipulating the angling of tesserae which the Byzantine artists exploited to greatest effect. For them, tilting the precious golden glass toward or away from light expressed Divinity – gold being a worthy vehicle to transport ideas of the Divine, its own purity assured by having been processed through the element of fire. The reflective quality of the materials was used as the most important technique for expressing religious ideas in pictorial form, in the expression of the Sublime.

“Sunlight shining on the façade of the Great Mosque in Damascus or glancing across the interior of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul; candlelight shimmering in the interiors of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; the artificial light shining onto the mosaics of Sta. Maria Maggiore or San Clemente in Rome – all are illuminations that transform the mosaic surface into a frieze of light.

“Thus the act of looking can go beyond the first cerebral response and can become a transcendental experience. This, in the mind of a believer, is a real and direct relationship



8. Elaine M. Goodwin, *Above Each Other*, glass mosaic.



9. Elaine M. Goodwin, *Sospiri*, 2012. “Some have perceived symbols of emotional states...”.

with God and for a non-believer creates a profound sense of awe and wonderment.

“This light is, in its various myriad parts, at once brilliant or shadowed; it has the ability to deter the viewer from searching for any reality in the mosaic by puzzling out the pictorial nature of the image, for example by trying to trace the contour lines of a saint, but to seek the abstract, which is already there.

“Any initial sense of awe, experienced when seeing a mosaic within a religious setting, such as the inside of a church, the precinct of a Mosque or even, I can assure you, within an art gallery, can give way to a greater sense of understanding or consciousness. This can be reached only when we look and marvel

and allow the mosaic itself and the light that emanates from it, to act as a catalyst to a greater consciousness.

“I returned home to my studio knowing I had found a medium through which I too would be able to pursue my ever-increasing questions on the nature of Existence. I experimented within the boundaries of mosaic – a medium whose paramount merit for me now had become the reflective surface qualities of its materials. It would be impossible to express myself fully in any other materials but those having such characteristics: Venetian gold leaf glass, Ravenna glass, Venetian glass smalti and Carrara marble. Each, when cut and placed precisely, holds and disperses light.



10. *Mists*. Reflecting “the muted tones that are unique to our climate...”  
Photo: Kate Baily.



11. *Mists*. Photo: Kate Baily.  
Detail.





12. *Byzantine Kisses*, 2013, detail.

“My work changed from imitation of nature to abstract contemplation; from an outward looking to an inward attitude of mind. It now expresses what I choose to leave out rather than what I put in; it epitomizes an eloquence of the less. For all who look, at each and every moment, light is held, captured, and let go – continually and continuously. It is, for me a sublime engagement.”

A constant of her imagery is always, she says, “the male and the female”. Peter Fischer, the eminent art historian and a close friend, had always told her that her work “was erotic in extremis”. Many people have seen imagery in her work that can be read as *The Female*: triangles, curves that evoke lips, thighs and perhaps breasts. Some have perceived symbols of emotional states, accentuated by her titles: *Sospiri*; *Above Each Other*; *Kisses Apart*.

“I carry a sketch book around with me at all times recording thoughts, views and images and so on. My work is in great part my life – a compendium and constant expression of what is to be alive today. My mind is a labyrinthine repository of things felt and sensed – one thread of which is to be unravelled and held in each new work. Mosaic making, by its very nature – a contemplative building up of an image piece by piece – suits my disposition; for me it permits just the right amount of contemplation and inner reflection. Whether it is the cutting of the tesserae on the hammer and hardie, the mixing of various mastics in which to set each tessera, the question of whether or not to grout, or the size and the



13. *Acquiescence*, 2013, detail.

siting of a work; all these considerations and more present themselves time and time again with each new piece.

“I never draw complete cartoons – to do so would assume a finished piece before even beginning. I start each new work with an enquiry and often a title and with a feel for its energy. I create directly onto the support, perhaps starting with a line, vertical or horizontal, or points of tension or commingling; my work can be understood as an expression of the abstract. Each piece is built up with certainties as to rhythm, colour and the texture of light, which play out through the specific placing of the materials: the unparalleled reflective qualities found in specialized golds, smalti, marble and glass. I design my mosaics to exist in an ever changing state – dependent on light and movement. I love the ability of the medium of mosaic to express this impermanence.

“For me every single tessera put into the cement is saying something individual. There is something essentially sculptural about each of the pieces as they are placed in relationship to each other; each tiny unit is a small sculpture in itself, producing a minuscule sculptural surface. Spatially, the extra dimension gained thus is paramount – infinitesimal, but definitely there.

“I make tiny changes of angle as I place each tessera, focussing on the manipulation of light; the subtlest shifts are perhaps the most important.” Also, she says, the transitions from one material to another, from glass to marble to gold to granite, and the spaces



14. Exhibition: *Pulsations of Marrakech*, 2005. Bab Kabir 1. Photo: John Melville.

between each piece and between each section matter also. These delicate changes in surface texture between materials count greatly, not only because, “working in mosaic is all about manipulating light, exactly as the ancient Byzantines did”, but in bringing a strong tactile element to the work. She has always been drawn to the physicality of her materials.

Elaine divides her time between her home and studio in Exeter, and Marrakech in Morocco, where she bought a house in 2001. Her home, Dar Aicha, lies between the two main thoroughfares into the souk – the covered market place thronging with the traders and fabricators that give the ancient and famous medina of the city its character and atmosphere.

“In each place I’ll work with different colours. Being very English I love the special monochrome light that comes into my Exeter studio. My work here is based on an

understanding of light around me and reflects the muted tones that are unique to our climate – its rains and mists: silver, soft, nebulous and glowing, so I use silvers, white marble, grey granite. I was unaware until quite recently how much the surrounding light affected me until Marrakech became my home in 2001. My studio work there is suffused with vibrant North African light – golds, sulphurous yellows, warm pinks and reds – all terrifying to contemplate in Exeter. In Morocco I’m drawn to all the many colours and textures of gold – I hardly ever use yellow-gold in England. Marrakech is an inspirational place that allows an immersion in colour, but I am intrigued by, if fearful of atmospheric oriental colour.”

Despite her misgivings, Elaine, in her Luxembourg, Ravenna and Paris exhibition in 2013 –*Homage to Byzantium* – produced mosaics that evoked for one critic: ‘unstoppable flows of burning lava. Our eyes, dazzled but deceived, see ochres, yellows, and shades of sienna, not the vermilion and blackness of volcanic reality’ (Roger Petitraoul. *Mosaïque Magazine*, December 2013).

Her exhibitions, *Pulsations of Marrakech*, which ran in Marrakech, March to April 2005, and as *Aspects of Light II*, in Exeter, May to July 2005, celebrated her life at the heart of the souk. “The creative energy which pulsates in Marrakech is strong; I live in the heart of the souk in the old medina, where artisans and their artefacts abound. The unique contours of doors, minarets, fountains and windows are often reflected in the shapes of the supports I work on there.

“Morocco continues to inspire; my next exhibition there – my third: *Voices of the Desert* – will record my experience of travels in various deserts, in particular the Moroccan Sahara, with fifty small works alongside the work of a Moroccan calligrapher and storyteller Mohamed Abaouibida.”

Elaine goes annually to Venice to visit the legendary mosaic manufacturing studio of Orsoni, there to stock up on the materials she loves and of which she has a deep technical knowledge. She has a close relationship and friendship with the famed Lucio Orsoni



himself. She seeks out the material with the most nuanced and complex surface textures, all in the service of projecting light. For the mirrored glass she goes to Ravenna. She says she selling her work is most important as a means of buying more materials.

“The one word I have never used about mosaic is the C-word: craft. Whilst the techniques and mastery of the medium are important, they are not, for me, paramount. What intrigues me is the supreme ability of the medium to carry ideas. My abiding focus for mosaic is to realise it as an art form; so the C-word does not appear in my books, articles or talks. I always try to draw out the possibilities of mosaic to be an art of expression. It saddens me that contemporary gallery curators retain a blinkered vision for mosaic – regarding it as an applied art alone. I believe that by seeing and experiencing mosaic in galleries as the sublime art it can be, this narrow comprehension can be changed.

“I work 10-12 hours in my studios – on three or four pieces at a time. I can’t wait each morning to begin as early as I can – accompanied by copious cups of tea whether in England or in Morocco. I work most of the day; I find it hard to go out and leave my studio, but I like to leave the pieces to brew for a while and then come back to them. I find that I need a bit of space to allow me to see them differently. When I work, it’s all about finding the rhythm of placing the tesserae.

“In Marrakech, I awake early to the gentle murmur of the spoken Koran and the calls to the first prayer, then the tiny birds, the *tibbibs*, echo the sound in calls to their young in repetitive, insistent voices. My day has begun in earnest and I go to the studio. The day closes with the far-echoing last calls to prayer after the circling swifts have departed to black night. The curtain of the sky is drawn and the moon on occasions reflects in my fountain and I reflect again in my studio and with my work.

“An artist’s life – my life – is one of continuous enquiry: I ask questions of myself and answer them through the work, again and again with varying degrees of success. It is a never-ending dialogue between experience and creation. It is now a busy period with

forthcoming exhibitions in Morocco, England, Vienna and Luxembourg.

“My recent Paris exhibition in St Germaine, the *quartier* of the Existentialists was thrilling. I felt at home and I kept ‘seeing and hearing’ Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and all their artist contemporaries. Like them, I need to give expression to the Absolutes – the questions that trouble and engage my every waking second. Mosaic has enabled me to do this and the Byzantine masters gave me my voice.”

سعيدة أنا فنانه

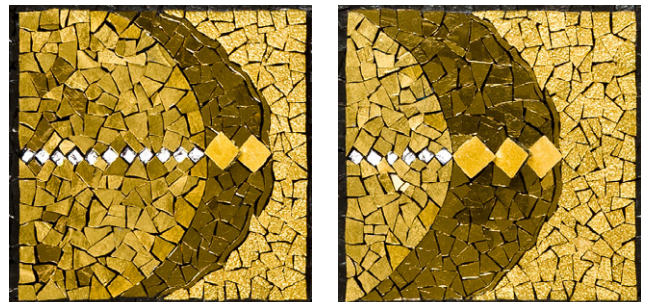
I am a happy artist: *Anna Fahanna Fanana* (Moroccan Arabic).

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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15. *Sailing to Byzantium*, 2012. Details.