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Gold Mosaic: Mosaic Art: Elaine M Goodwin ©

Not only did the Byzantines know how to make mosaic gold they were masters of manipulating the material for profound spiritual effects.

This fact, I experienced firsthand about 25 years ago while looking at the superb 6th.C mosaics of the church of San Vitale, Ravenna in Italy, and it is this knowledge that underpins all my mosaic work.

The Byzantines, worked with a profound understanding of their mosaic materials, above all mosaic gold. They knew that when it was cut and pressed into the mortar of an apse, a wall or a mihrāb its reflective surface, could be angled at varying degrees towards or away from a source of light, to result in a mosaic whose surface shimmered with light and shadow.

Both natural light and candle light could be used to produce a great variety of effects giving a surface of intense meaning. Any viewer or supplicant within the sacred space, a church or a mosque could be transported, by this brilliant use of light, into the presence of Divinity.

With each tessera acting as a unit of light, the rich hues of mosaic gold, could transform what could initially be seen as a magnificent decorative mosaic, into a vision of elusive and spiritual power - and it is this latent power within the materials of mosaic which can turn a paradisiacal garden into a paradisiacal experience.

Thus sunlight shining, for example on the façade of the Great Mosque in Damascus or the candlelight shimmering in the interiors of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or the artificial light shining onto the mosaics of San Clemente in Rome or Hagia Sophia in Istanbul all provide sources of light able to transform the mosaic surface into a frieze of light.

Understanding this, the act of looking can go beyond the first cerebral viewing and can become a transcendental experience. This, in the mind of a believer is a real and direct relationship with GOD and for a non-believer creates a real sense of awe and wonderment.

I believe, therefore, that the medium of mosaic can conspire to transubstantiate reality and take the viewer into another realm. This is dependent on the perception by us, the viewer.

To be clear: the very materials used in mosaic have the ability to play a crucial and unique role. The mosaic units or tesserae which are made up of glass and gold, are characterized by a reflective surface, which when cut and set individually into mortar, by the hand of an experienced artist, gives colour, definition but above all, LIGHT, and it is this light, which I know, as a mosaic artist, is the key to unlocking a deeper response in our looking.

This LIGHT is, in its various myriad of parts, at once brilliant or in shadow, and has the ability to distract the viewer, away from trying to find any reality in the mosaic, for example, by trying to trace the contour lines of a saint or working out the specific nature of an image. So, any initial sense of awe, experienced when seeing a mosaic within a religious setting, such as the inside of a church or in 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 reached only when we look and marvel and allow that which is marvelled upon, to act as a catalyst to a greater consciousness.

Underlying my own work is one great unifying and harmonious Absolute. It is one of Celebration - a combination of wonder, awe and delight in being alive and able to express my beliefs through my Art - most specifically MOSAIC - an art form which, as we have seen, has the extraordinary and unique ability to move our understanding from one level of experience to another, deeper and therefore more profound level.