



Micromosaic

High-definition and nanoscale in visual creations of the late XVIII and XIX century

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Viewing an artwork in micromosaic is a unique experience of intense visual effect. We cannot easily understand the way its pictorial surface has been realized, unless we come very close to it, when we surprisingly discover an amazing and microscopic texture of colored tiles.

Micromosaic is a precious and refined technique of making mosaic by using minuscule tiles [tessere in Italian] applied to a metal, opaline glass or marble support, through an appropriate glue (made of travertine powder, linen oil and slaked lime). Tiles are made of enamel, a vitreous and opaque substance similar to glass, obtained by fusing silica with mineral components that generate various colors.

The history of micromosaic has interesting affinities with the modern and contemporary history of communication media, mainly with the television screen. Comparable aims characterize both of them. They significantly share the purpose of reaching the highest spatial resolution of the elements forming the images (pixels, as we call them today), and the widest chromatic gamma, in order to represent something, faithfully. This high-resolution way of making mosaic is not the most widespread but, of course, one of the intrinsic possibilities of mosaic itself.

Micromosaic has been developed during the XVIII century in Rome, within the context of the Vatican Mosaic Studio, the laboratory where the realization of the mosaic decorations of St. Peter Church had been going on since the late XVI century. This mosaic decoration embodied an increasing necessity to reach a painting-like appearance. Around 1770, when an occupational crisis arose, high-skill technicians and enterprising artists began to experiment some other ways to work in mosaic, in order to develop precious products for new market segments. A technical discovery was the spark for this. The hard enamels, produced in millions of colors, could be heat up again by naked flame. Once softened, they could be stretched, to form a tiny string which could be broken in microscopic tiles, less than a millimeter in dimensions [*smalti filati* in Italian, spinned enamels]. Another important technical advancement followed after a brief period of time: a new type of filamentous material, that allowed a further variety of color and half-tone to be produced. It was obtained by mixing two different colors in an incompletely way, in order to cause a gradation of colors within each microscopic tile. The technique took the Italian name of *smalti malmischiati*, poorly mixed enamels. Thanks to these technical procedures mosaicists began to decorate many kinds of objects, tobacco and jewelry cases, rings, bracelets, pendants, chokers, bonbonnière, vases, insertions in tabletops, small frames. Many private workshops arose in Rome and these highly refined and precious objects found a great success among the multitude of tourists searching for souvenirs while visiting the city, especially *grand-tour* travelers. The representation of subjects like antique roman ruins, urban views, landscapes and huge monuments of the city obtained the greatest success. These were perfect miniatures, because the scale reduction concerns not only the image but mainly the technique. The Coliseum in a medallion is conceptually bewildering. Cemented bricks to build the monument and micro enamels tiles to reproduce it in a little ring. Each micro-tile seems to substitute a brick, a leaf of a tall tree, a scrap of his bark, reaching a superb stylized effect in the human bodies and faces representation.

Currently, the exceptional craftsmanship of micromosaic is not well known, and only a handful highly skilled artisans on a worldwide level have remained, to practice it, allowing it to be conveyed to

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the future. Nevertheless it has stimulating potentialities to link an ancient, local, craft and almost disappeared technique to the conceptual topics, imagery and references of contemporary art and visual culture, such as techniques like persian rug, islamic geometric decorations in wood inlay, or others, are finding cutting-edge applications. An emerging attitude in contemporary practices which marks the differences in terms of local and global, artistic and handcrafted, material and conceptual, strictly intertwined, points of view. DCCAC offers unique opportunities to develop artistic projects which would explore the world of micromosaic, allowing artists to engage fruitful relationships with the few existing artisans still working this refined technique.

