

Making Mosaics

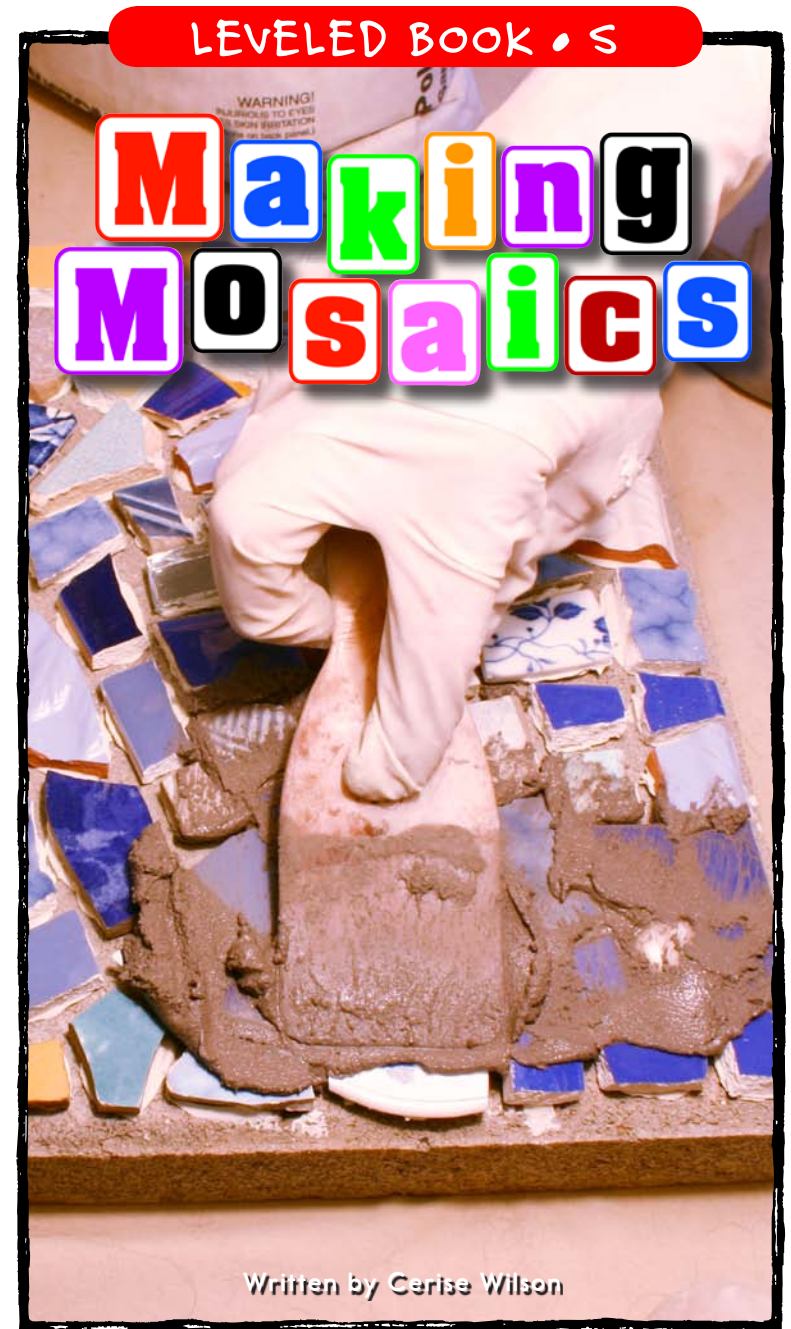
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Correlation

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History of Mosaics



In the beginning, most mosaics were practical as well as decorative. In Turkey, pebble mosaic floors were discovered in homes built during the 700s BC. Some of the ancient Romans had wall mosaics showing sacred images. These kinds of wall displays were also used by early religious groups to decorate their places of worship.



People recently uncovered this ancient mosaic in the ruins of a Christian church in Israel.

By the 1400s, mosaics were not just used for practical purposes. Mosaics became an art form. Entire walls and ceilings were covered with mosaics that contained complex images. During the Renaissance, mosaics mirrored paintings. This was called **pictorial realism**.



In the 1700s and 1800s, artists created mosaic miniatures: tiny bits of glass and ceramic used to decorate keepsake boxes, plaques, and jewelry. At the end of the 1800s, the **Art Nouveau** movement sparked a renewed interest in creating mosaics. Today, artists



create both formal and abstract mosaic designs.

Art Nouveau example (top)
20th Century art (bottom)



Materials and Supplies

Although the finished product looks complex, the process of making a mosaic is quite simple. In fact, many of the materials are inexpensive and available at any hardware store. Some are even free. Below are five things you need to get started.

Tesserae: Tesserae are the many small pieces that are put together into a larger design. Some of the most commonly used tesserae are stone, glass, and ceramic tile; however, a broken plate or cup, interesting stones, or a bucket of seashells can be used for a mosaic. Do not limit your creativity.

Adhesives: You will also need some kind of glue to permanently stick the pieces of your tesserae to the surface of your choosing. There are several types. One is mastic, which is latex-based. Another is thinset, which is like mortar.

Grout: Grout will also be needed to fill the spaces between the tesserae. All grouts contain Portland cement for strength and durability. Some are **polymer-enhanced** for even more strength and flexibility.

Use non-sanded grout for filling cracks less than one-eighth inch wide but sanded grout for larger cracks. Both types come in a variety of colors.





Tools: Many people use a hammer to break larger pieces of tesserae. For more control, there are handheld tile nippers, which look like pliers. Other tools such as a **trowel**, **float**, **palette knife**, or **spatula** may also be needed to smooth grouts and glues. Finally, you will need a sponge to wipe the surface of your mosaic after you apply the grout.

Protection: Safety is always important. When breaking or cutting the tesserae, you will need to wear safety glasses and a dust mask. The powdered cement mortars and grouts contain silica. Silica can irritate your eyes and lungs. Also, latex or rubber gloves should be worn when working with grout and mortar to protect your hands.



Making a Mosaic

Begin your project by choosing the item you wish to decorate. Consider a simple item, such as a garden stepping stone, and a simple design. Then, gather your tesserae and cut them into uniform sizes. If you are using tile nippers, place the cutting jaws so that they overlap the edge of your tesserae, about an eighth of an inch. Squeeze the handles firmly. To make a curved shape, try several small cuts, nibbling away slowly. If you have problems cutting your tesserae with the tile nippers, chances are you are putting too much of the material into the jaws of the nippers.

Now, choose your first piece of tesserae, spread a small amount of glue on the back, and press it onto the surface of the item you wish to decorate. Make sure not to apply too much glue. Use just enough to make sure each piece stays in place. (If you apply too much, the glue will push up between the mosaic pieces.) Use a palette knife or your finger to wipe away any extra glue. Follow this method until the object is covered with tesserae. When positioning pieces, be sure to leave space between them for the grout. (The size and frequency of the grout influences the overall design. Stagger the cracks between pieces to avoid creating straight lines throughout your design.)



Once the item is covered with tesserae and has dried for 24 hours or more, you are ready to grout. Cut off the top of a plastic gallon milk jug and use the bottom part as a mixing bowl for your grout. Start by making sure the surface of your item is wiped clean of any remaining glue. Then, wearing rubber gloves, safety glasses, and a dust mask, mix a small batch of grout, following the directions on the package. You should aim for a thick, smooth mixture like peanut butter. You can use a spatula or trowel to mix your grout. Once it is mixed, let it sit to **cure** for about ten minutes before continuing.





Next, apply an even coating of grout to the surface. Then, press it into the cracks with a spatula or rubber float. Once all the cracks are filled with grout, you can begin to remove the rest from the surface.

Start by thoroughly wiping the entire mosaic with a lightly dampened sponge. Have a bucket of clean water nearby. Use it to clean the sponge, wring it out, and then wipe the surface again. Repeat this until the surface is fairly clean and smooth.

Make sure all the pieces of tesserae are visible. Sometimes the thinner pieces get buried by the grout. There may still be a haze left on the surface of the mosaic, too. This can be wiped off with a clean, soft cloth in about an hour, as the grout hardens.

When cleaning up, do not dump the water used to rinse the sponge down the drain. The grout can settle and harden in a drainpipe and cause future clogs. Also, when cleaning up after working with cement products such as grout, it is helpful to rinse your hands in vinegar before washing them. This will help restore the **pH balance** of your skin.

After three days, the grout will harden completely and can be sealed. Sealing is not necessary, but if the mosaic will be outdoors or will often come into contact with moisture, it is a good idea. This will also help seal out any stains.

Do You Know?

Occasionally misting the mosaic with clean, cool water for three days will help it cure. For this, you can use a simple plastic spray bottle.



Conclusion

Although the finished product looks very sophisticated and complex, making a mosaic is quite simple and requires only a few materials and supplies. Beginners and professionals alike can create beautiful, lasting designs with broken tiles, pieces of broken dishes, and other unique objects. With these and a few other common tools, you can create your own mosaic in no time.



Glossary

Art Nouveau	a style of decoration that depicts leaves and flowers in long curvy lines (p. 6)
cure	to preserve something through a chemical process (p. 12)
float	a tool used for smoothing plaster or cement (p. 9)
palette knife	small artist's knife with a flexible blade used to mix, scrape, or apply paint (p. 9)
pH balance	the correct level of acid; too much acid in the body causes illness (p. 14)
pictorial realism	an art style that depicts subjects accurately rather than in an idealistic or abstract way (p. 6)
polymer	large molecules linked together which add strength to other compounds (p. 8)
trowel	a flat tool used to make even surfaces (p. 9)