



Alba, 2008. 70 (h) x 11.5 (w) centimeters

Verdiano Marzi

For the Love of the Art

by Sophie Drouin

It's a hot day; dry and bright. All around me are the sounds of stone and glass being cleaved by hammers, hardies, and nippers. Suddenly, from over my shoulder, I hear a quiet voice say, "Oh, that tessera is not happy." I look up and there is Verdiano Marzi, his head cocked slightly to one side, squinting at my work in progress. He repeats, "No, not happy at all." Slowly, he points, and I concentrate on a very small area with one particular piece that has, indeed, been set carelessly. It seems to muddy up all the other pieces surrounding it. I reposition that one small piece just a bit and Marzi smiles. "Much better!"

I am in Corsica in the heavy heat of August taking a workshop with master mosaicist Verdiano Marzi, whose work I have admired since I purchased my first mosaic book twelve years ago. The combined warmth of the climate, the people and the teaching style is more endearing than I could ever convey in mere words. I can scarcely believe that I am working with this mosaic master in this minute village in Corsica where my day begins with the braying of a donkey and sheep graze along the route I take to the studio. There are no shops in the village, except for a tiny boulangerie and the grocer's van that snakes through the village twice a week, announcing his presence periodically with a few horn beeps. The airline has misplaced my luggage, so I have no choice but to rely upon the kindness of my colleagues and hosts until my things are found again. I am not just in another place; I am in another time.

The workshop will last for 10 days. The participants are mostly local and all French. I am the only North American, and a few of the participants and local organizers marvel that I have travelled so far for what they see as a very small and informal workshop. But I am very happy to be in this sunny and rustic place and to finally get a chance to work with Marzi!

Marzi's love of mosaic dates back to his childhood in Ravenna. He was born there in 1949. Early on an observant schoolteacher noticed his artistic gifts. He recalls: "She must have noticed that I was not a good student. I remember that I was always doodling in class rather than paying attention. I used to trade with other students who would exchange their services with math or other assignments for some caricature or other drawing that I could make easily." This teacher recommended that his parents, who were of

extremely modest means, send him to the newly opened State Institute of Art for Mosaic. There, he flourished, earning scholarships that ensured that he could continue his education at the Academy of Fine Arts of Ravenna. This school was a hub of future mosaic artists, including Luciana Notturmi, Marco De Luca, Giovanna Galli, Paolo Racagni, and Marco Bravura.

The great Renato Signorini had a workshop, and Marzi soon joined as a young professional mosaic artist. He continued to work for a while there when Gino Signorini, Renato's son, took over, but eventually moved to Paris in 1973. There he joined with Giovanna Galli and Riccardo Licata, forming the artistic group "Anaxagoras" and working jointly with them on artistic projects and exhibitions.

Marzi's creative projects and teaching opportunities have taken him to such exotic places as Hanoi, Vietnam, where he and Galli created a mosaic for the floor of the entrance to the Opera House. In Dharamsala, India, he worked with Tibetan children and met the Dalai Lama. Closer to home, he has created large-scale public mosaics in the Val de Lille metro station, for the Bourgoin-Jallieu Lycee professionnel in Isere and for the Villars de Denain





Icona, 2007. 25.5 x 25.5 centimeters



Icona, 2007. 25.5 x 25.5 centimeters



Icona, 2007. 25.5 x 25.5 centimeters



Silenzio, 2008. 48 (h) by 44 (w) centimeters

college. Marzi has received many accolades and awards including the Premio Murano at the International competition of glass art in Venice in 1987, and the Grand Prix regional des Metiers d'art in Paris in 1990.

While the majority of his work has been large-scale, Marzi has been steadily creating a series of smaller art mosaics at his personal studio in Bagnolet, a suburb of Paris. Exhibits celebrating his work have taken place in both his native and adoptive countries. Venice, Ferrara, Paris, Ravenna, Paray-le-Monial, and Chartres are a few of the cities where in-depth shows of his work have been mounted.

I found Marzi to be a deeply caring man with keen powers of observation. He focuses intently on the students, friends, and colleagues he works with and lovingly accepts them for who they are. He is incredibly patient, kind, and especially tireless, being one of the first to get to the workshop space in the morning and almost always the last

to leave. He teaches with a kind of zealotry, as if wishing to instill the maximum amount of passion for the art by his guidance. I don't think I have met a more positive man in my life. But, being "positive" does not mean he is unaware of the ugly things in life. Rather, it is because of the ugliness that he sees that his appreciation of the precious nature of humans and art is all the more enhanced.

Marzi prefers to listen rather than talk, and when he does speak, it is often with a slight hesitation. He pauses to choose his words carefully, like verbal tesserae. I have come to feel that this man's primary language is really mosaic, and that he is trying to teach others its vocabulary and grammar. He talks of mosaic art lovingly, as an art form that combines all the human senses, and he enjoys all aspects, from the smell of marble to the clinks of hammer and hardie. In Marzi's mosaic language, no detail is too small to heighten the desired effect. The gigantic puzzle that is a mosaic relies on the care of its creator regarding

every detail no matter how small. Shapes, size, spacing and placement are all elements that add to the visual potential. One has to take great care not to miss an opportunity to maximize the potential greatness of a specific design or material. Ideally this becomes a mutually beneficial relationship, a love story.

In his own creations, Marzi pays tribute to the precious and individual nature of his materials by letting the raw material itself dominate the mosaic conversation with all its strength and beauty intact. And what materials they are! Slabs of pure Belgian black marble and South American Azul granites; Moroccan fossil-rich red-brown and slate that he sometimes uses in thin slivers; smalti made in France by a company called Albertini, whose wares he uses almost exclusively. The choice is dazzling, and Marzi's knowledge of his materials is extensive. He works with as great a variety of these treasures as possible -- expanding the existing mosaic vocabulary whenever he can. The exuberance of juxtaposition of colour, texture and size help make Marzi's work vibrant and graceful at once, even as the modern freedom of his tessera language is steeped in a deep respect for the ancient techniques.

This respect for the classical roots of contemporary mosaic language is something Marzi has not failed to impart to me. And, as I leave Corsica to return to Canada, I know I will never forget to pay attention to the small details of my work. Thanks to my incredible experience with Marzi, I am now devoted to creating "happy" tesserae.

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Photos by Jean-Claude Guilloux



Odalisca Bianca, 2007. 61 (h) by 90 (w) centimeters



Icaro (triptych), 2006. 50 (h) x 100 (w) centimeters

Sophie Drouin is a second generation mosaic artist trained in the Modern Italian style. Her works can be seen in galleries and private residences in Canada, the US, Europe, and Australia. She enjoys the diversity of mosaic possibilities when both teaching and creating, and particularly likes to innovate using both traditional and unique materials and textures, from marble to raw minerals, metallic elements and dimensional accents.

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