

Queen Esther Mosaics: The Hidden and The Revealed

Kraliçe Esther Mozaikleri: Saklı ve Açığa Çıkarılmış

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(Received 15 November 2013, accepted after revision 15 January 2015)

Abstract

As our world becomes more and more fractured in the 21st century, the archetypal story of individualism can be compared to fragmented elements (tesserae) being made whole again; we can't heal the world until we heal ourselves. My work is a reconstruction of an ancient story using ancient and contemporary materials, i.e. I cut glass (deconstruction) and then assemble those pieces to form new shapes which thus acquire a new life. The Esther Mosaics reveal a personal interpretation of the story of Queen Esther which brings forth ideas about women's role in our society, which also extend to more universal statements about the human condition.

Keywords: Persian stories and symbols, biblical heroines, sacrifice, women issues, feminism, mosaics, glass mosaics, contemporary mosaic art, Byzantine art and mosaics, Queen Esther, Mosaic making methods, ancient symbols in contemporary art, figurative mosaic art.

Özet

21. yüzyılda, dünyamızın giderek daha parçalanmış bir hale gelmesi nedeniyle, bireyselliğin arketip hikayesi, parçalanmış öğelerin (tesserae) bütünü tekrar meydana getirmesiyle mukayese edilebilir; kendimizi iyileştirmeden dünyayı iyileştiremeyiz. Benim çalışmam, antik ve çağdaş malzemeleri kullanarak, eski bir hikayeyi yeniden inşa etmektir. Diğer bir deyişle, camları kesiyorum, sonra bu parçaları, yeni formlar oluşturmak için bir araya getiriyorum ve bu şekilde yeni bir hayat elde ediyorum. Esther Mozaikleri, toplumumuzda kadınların rolü hakkında fikirleri ortaya koyan ve insanlık durumu hakkında daha evrensel ifadelere uzanan Kraliçe Esther'in hikayesinin kişisel bir yorumlamasını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pers hikayeleri ve sembolleri, İncille ilgili kahramanlar, kurban, kadın sorunları, feminizm, mozaikler, cam mozaikler, çağdaş mozaik sanatı, Bizans sanatı ve mozaikleri, Kraliçe Esther, mozaik yapım teknikleri, çağdaş sanattaki antik semboller, figüratif mozaik sanatı.

Throughout my career I have explored relationships and the nature of the human condition through symbols and metaphors. I recently completed a series on sacrifice, and chose the biblical Queen Esther as a prototype for the courageous, selfless heroine who wins against all odds. As a young woman, Esther fulfilled her role as leader at a time of crisis with intelligence, persistence and dedication.

My fascination with the human body since the early days of art school led me to an artistic career focusing on interpersonal relationships and the human condition. Expressive faces and bodily postures have been the vehicle for expressing those concerns.

This preoccupation continued once I began working with mosaics. Although a completely different artistic discipline, this ancient art form had produced at various times examples of splendid Byzantine mosaics.

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My Queen Esther Series comprises 10 mosaics, - 10 scenes from the biblical Book of Esther. Through symbolic gestures, costume, colour combination, facial expression and the use of lights and darks, I strive to endow each character with my personal interpretation of the biblical personage's physical attributes, social status, personality and emotions at the particular place and time depicted.

I use live models in all my mosaics. Starting with numerous sketches in black graphite on grey paper, my designs or "cartoons" get painted before I start cutting and gluing. These mirror image painted sketches become my guides throughout the long hours of cutting and gluing the glass tesserae.



Figure 1
Esther's Offering 70" x 43", Smalti, gold tesserae, gems, gold leaf on wood panel.



Figure 2
Haman Leading Mordechai on the Royal Horse 70" x 33", Venetian Vitreous Glass, smalti, gems, gold tesserae, gold leaf on panel



Figure 3
Queen Esther
75" x 33", Venetian
vitreous glass,
gold tesserae,
gems, gold leaf
on wood panel.

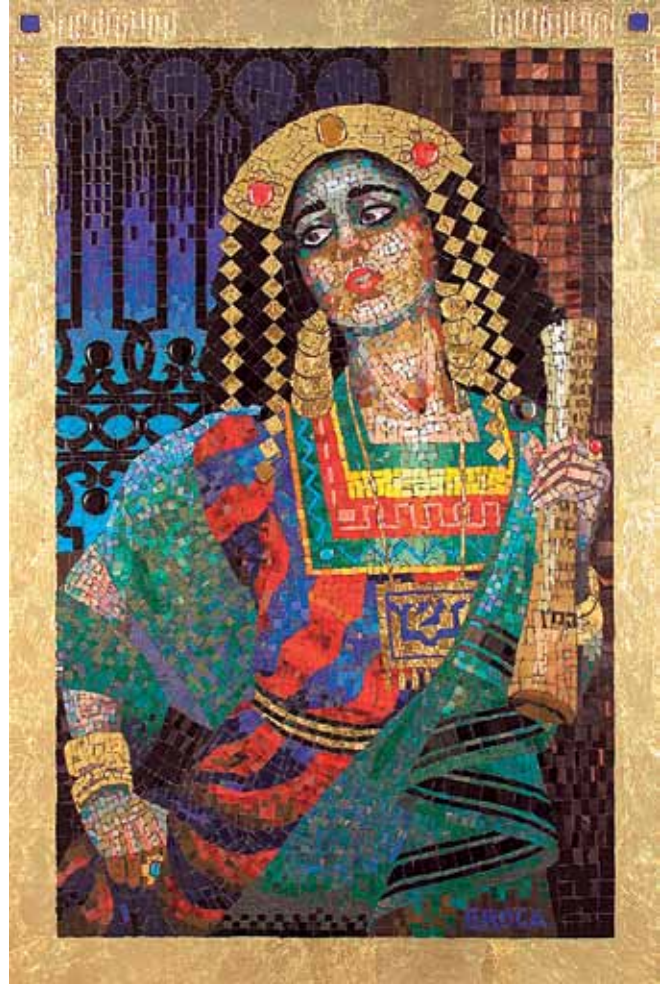


Figure 5
*Queen Esther
Holding Evidence
of Haman's Guilt*
48" x 32", Venetian
glass, smalti, gold
tesserae, gems,
gold leaf on
wood panel.



Figure 4
*Queen Esther
Revealing Her True
Identity* 48" x 33",
Iridium smalti, gems,
gold tesserae,
gold leaf on panel.



Figure 6
*Queen Esther With
Scroll* 36" x 23.5",
Venetian Vitreous
Glass, smalti, gems,
gold tesserae,
gold leaf on panel.



Figure 7
Queen Esther with Mordechai
64" x 64, Venetian Vitreous Glass,
smalti, gems, gold tesserae,
gold leaf on panel.
(left page, top)

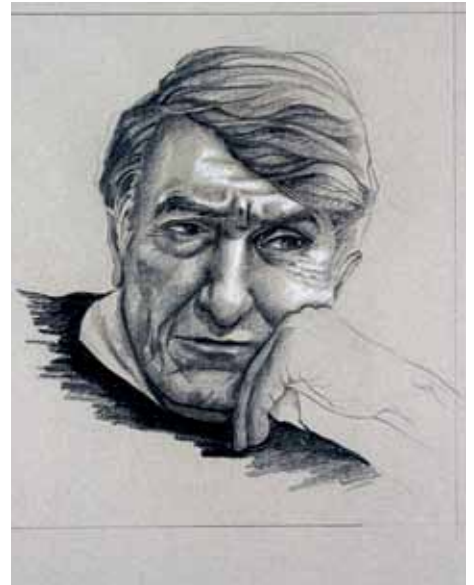
Figure 8
Queen Esther's Banquet 38" x 104",
Venetian vitreous glass, smalti,
gold tesserae, gold leaf on wood panel.
(left page, bottom)

Figure 10
*Queen Esther Seeking Permission
to Speak* DIPTYCH, 64" x 88",
Each panel 64" x 44",
Venetian Vitreous Glass, smalti,
gems, gold tesserae, millefiori,
on Honeycomb Panel.



Figure 9
Surreptitious Dialogue, 2007 23" x 30", Venetian Vitreous Glass, millefiori, pearls, gold
tesserae, smalti, on Honeycomb Panel.





graphite sketches

Figure 11
Esther Holding Evidence of
Haman's Guilt

Figure 12
Queen Esther

Figure 13
Queen Esther's Banquet



Painted cartoons

Figure 14
Painted sketch Esther

Figure 15
Queen Esther and Mordechai

Two mosaic methods were used in this Queen Esther Series.

Indirect Method / Reverse Method

For those mosaics executed in the Indirect Method, the graphite drawing also had to be recreated as a reverse cartoon in an appropriately proportioned larger size. In this method, the tesserae are glued upside down onto the full-sized reverse image cartoon using a water-based adhesive. Once completed, the whole assembly would be inverted onto a permanent panel – I now use the Aerolam or honeycomb aluminum panels as permanent substrates -covered with a type of cement called thinset.

I always start with the face. After choosing the various flesh tones and other colours I begin cutting the glass for the eyes, "the window of the soul". Not until I am satisfied with the eye expression do I continue with the rest of the face. This



Figure 16
Queen Esther in
Surreptitious



Figure 17
Esther holding Evidence
of Haman's Guilt in
progress detail 1



Figure 18
Queen Esther sketch
and mosaic

first step is of utmost importance as it sets the mood and the intent of the mosaic. It also establishes the basis of the relationship between myself and my subject, who I will come to relate to in a very deep and complex way before the mosaics are completed.

Unlike in an oil painting portrait where one can establish the face in an underpainting wash, in mosaic, the artist completes all details of the face at the same time as the larger areas through the use of *andamento*, the movement or flow of the small cut cubes of glass or stone called “*tesserae*” in Italian.

Following the bone structure of the face, I continue gluing the lightest flesh tone first, thus establishing the source of light suitable for the portrait. Each piece of cut glass is chosen by colour and shade, then placed one after another in a carefully conceived flow to create the impression of volume. The result are rows of *tesserae* that snake over and under anatomical protrusions and cavities such as nose and eye sockets, forming three-dimensional planes which advance or recede according to the skeletal shapes underneath.

The reflection of light on the surface of the finished mosaic is of utmost importance. The Direct Method is an excellent procedure as it allows the artist to insert each *tessera* into the cement at different angles from the beginning, thus achieving a myriad of potentially shiny surfaces that shimmer when struck by any kind of light.



Figure 19
Work in progress

Figure 20
Queen Esther Seeking Permission
to speak in Progress detail 9

Figure 21
Cutting glass for Esther & Mord

Figure 22
Working on Esther
Revealing 3

To achieve the same reflective results using the Indirect Method, I manipulate the angles of the tesserae manually during that narrow window of time after the flip, when the thinset cement is still soft and it is possible to push down the corners of each piece by hand. This way, the uniformly level surface becomes uneven and equally reflective. It works well for me, especially when using this Indirect or Reverse Method I still have the advantage of changing undesirable

areas in progress at any time. All that is needed is to add water to the unsatisfactory area and the water-soluble glue will allow the removal of tesserae days or months after their initial placement.

Many changes that deviate from the original painted sketch are happening at this point of the process, since I tend to make spontaneous decisions to alter former choices of shapes and colours once the face is completed on the paper and has defined the tone of the final portrait.

Remember that what we see on paper is the back of the glass on a temporary substrate. Once I flip the finished mosaic onto the permanent base, this mirror image of my original design will revert to its proper orientation.

Many Esther mosaics display vertical compositions. A vertical composition is especially powerful in a portrait. The viewer's eye is encouraged to enter the work at the bottom of the composition and follow the serpentine linear forms that congregate at the top, to the pinnacle of the full portrait, the head.

As for the actual assembly of the mosaic, it necessitates an extremely detailed scrutiny of every shard of glass in relation to every other in the overall composition. It forces me to eat, sleep and dream about every facet of my subject, sometimes for months at a time, and to construct my characters virtually cell by cell, until they can ultimately represent themselves through this highly expressive medium.

Once all the glass tesserae cover the temporary paper cartoon in reverse, and all corrections have been made, the next step is to “butter” or cover it with a thin layer of thinset. At the same time the permanent substrate also gets a layer of cement, after which, it is carefully placed on top of the cement covered mosaic. Clamped as a sandwich, the two panels get “flipped”. Now the bottom panel is the actual mosaic with the brown paper showing. When dry the paper surface gets a hot water sponging which facilitates its removal and it's at that point that I quickly manipulate the corners of most of tesserae embedded in the soft thinset to give them an uneven look and feel. Once clean the mosaic in its original design appears to shimmer in the studio light. What a great feeling!

Figure 23
Applying cement to Queen Esther 1

Figure 24
Applying thinset to Queen Esther

Figure 25
Queen Esther in progress 1



Mosaic making is a labour-intensive proposition. Working backwards or mirror image the Indirect Method requires, is even more time consuming, because as a rule an artist is always favouring one side.. Working in reverse I find that a mirror by my side is a necessity. At regular intervals I revert to looking at my work in progress through the mirror in order to make sure that once the mosaic is flipped it will look natural. Also, working in reverse can also be frustrating at times. It is impossible to be assured that the flipped image will look exactly like the one executed in reverse. This is due to the thickness of the glass; once it is cut one hopes that cut is straight otherwise the extra half a millimeter or less left on a diagonal cut may drastically change the expression of the eyes or mouth. In an abstract composition this makes no difference, but in my work where an expression can change it is a problem.

Direct Method

This was one of the main reasons I switched to working in the Direct Method but still on a temporary substrate, as the Byzantines used to do. They used fresh lime as that temporary bed, and I use mesh or a sticky film, both being 21st century materials.

For the Direct Method I still execute sketches and painted cartoons, only this time they are not mirror images. I enlarge them to the full size of the projected mosaic and then I place and tape a sticky film on top. This material is clear and



Figure 26
Foot in J Meeting H



Figure 27
Arm and hand 2



Figure 28
Holoferness head in progress 1

one can see the cartoon underneath. It is far easier to stick the tesserae temporarily on it as no glue is necessary. To remove the tesserae for corrections again, no wetting is needed, just an easy removal.

Once the tesserae cover this sticky film or PLASTIC as they call it here, the top of the mosaic is covered with the same plastic as in a sandwich. With the help of a board this mosaic is flipped. Now the bottom of the mosaic is up and can be seen through the clear plastic. With great care, the plastic is removed and the bottom of the mosaic is buttered with thinset. The rest is exactly as in the Indirect Method with one exception. There is no brown paper to wet and remove at the end. When the thinset is dry the plastic is simply peeled off.

The Queen Esther mosaics were executed in the manner of the Byzantines, which means, gestural, symbolic and narrative, with significant usage of gold, they dramatize a well-known scene from a biblical story recognizable to many viewers. Unlike the old Byzantine mosaics however, mine carry a contemporary message to 21st century women: female empowerment. The biblical Esther story encourages women to believe in their own strength, even in a patriarchal society where women are usually submissive and dominated by men. Throughout the centuries, women possess the potential of the “assertive Esther” – one hidden inside a shy, reserved and obedient girl. As a wise woman and heroine, she remains a role model for all contemporary humankind.

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