


MEDITATION THROUGH MOSAICS

*Creating these beautiful works of art provides an outlet for free expression—
and awareness without judgment.*

by Cheryl Alkon

TINY BITS
CAN BECOME
SOMETHING BIG.





Years ago, I was strolling through an arts festival and came across a beautiful mosaic. The vivid celebration of turquoise, orange, pink, white and other colored tiles coalesced into swirls, stripes, stars, circles and the sun.

I was mesmerized and stared at this gem in awe. As I walked through the aisles of the festival, dozens of these works of art captured my attention. Each piece was unique but equally exquisite.

This experience inspired me to create mosaics of my own, so I enrolled in a local workshop and began piecing together my own



You don't
have to be a
skilled artist to
create beauty.

“Mosaic” likely originated from the Greek word, “mousa,” meaning “muse.”

creations. I loved how deeply I could focus on shaping and arranging the fragments to delight the eye. Looking at it on an even more profound level, I took comfort knowing that something that was broken could be built back into something beautiful. The significance felt powerful: While life can get messy, confused and cluttered, it can always be reshaped if you face it with care

and patience. Sometimes it can even end up a masterpiece—better than it was before.

This idea has never been more necessary than it is today. With serenity in short supply, making mosaic art has taken off. Around the country, women are soothing their minds, leaning into life’s slowdown, and creating one-of-a-kind treasures using shards of splintered glass, ceramic, tile and found

objects like buttons and costume jewelry that they place on mirrors, light-switch covers, garden paving stones and other items. The process allows the creator to unwind as she ponders, arranges, glues, grouts and polishes her piece.

FIND THE FLOW

Cheryl Cohen, a mosaic artist based in Holliston, Massachusetts, has taught students for the past decade. These days, she feels her calling more than ever. “I love that I can offer a creative solution to take that mental vacation during these challenging times,” she says. “For a while, students can get immersed in a new world and time flies.”

Cohen offers classes for new and experienced students. She has continued to teach classes virtually

during the pandemic, mailing supply kits to students' homes. She's glad she could keep at it, both for her students now, and, potentially, for future generations to get a glimpse into the past. "Part of the beauty of these is that they take more time and energy than other art, but they are a forever art," Cohen says.

WHAT THE SCIENCE SAYS

Though little research on mosaic creation and mindfulness exists, there's a lot of neurobiology involved in doing repetitive actions, says Claire Barnett, MD, owner and founder of Seattle Mosaic Arts.

Working on this type of craft engages a calming part of the brain that is different from the part that uses thinking, planning and imagining, she adds. "Once you've made the decision about what you want to make, the art of placing the tiles is soothing."

Barnett, a family physician, began to create after her two young daughters were killed in a plane crash. Barnett's mother, an artist, suggested mosaics might help her deal with her grief. The symbolism of shattering glass then putting the pieces back together to form something different, but still beautiful, seemed appropriate for Barnett at the time.

She was immediately enamored. Two years after the crash, Barnett decided to create memorial garden stones to mark her daughters' birthdays with eight- and six-point stars, representing the ages of her daughters when they were taken from her.

Eventually, Barnett quit her medical practice and opened her own studio to give people a place to express themselves and lean on others in times of grief. This past year, the kinds of comfort her studio provides has

expanded; it now offers support to those dealing with the stress and anxiety related to the coronavirus, including those who have lost loved ones, been laid off from jobs and are struggling with isolation. "It is remarkable how soothing the simple act of creating these treasures can be," Barnett says.

The community aspect of the studio is "a gentle antidote to loneliness," she explains. "There isn't anything else like this for most of us. It's like Cheers without the drinks."

During this past year, Barnett has offered prerecorded instructions for virtual learning and customized supply kits—people can drive up and grab the materials they want to work with. People start at home,

MOSAIC LEXICON

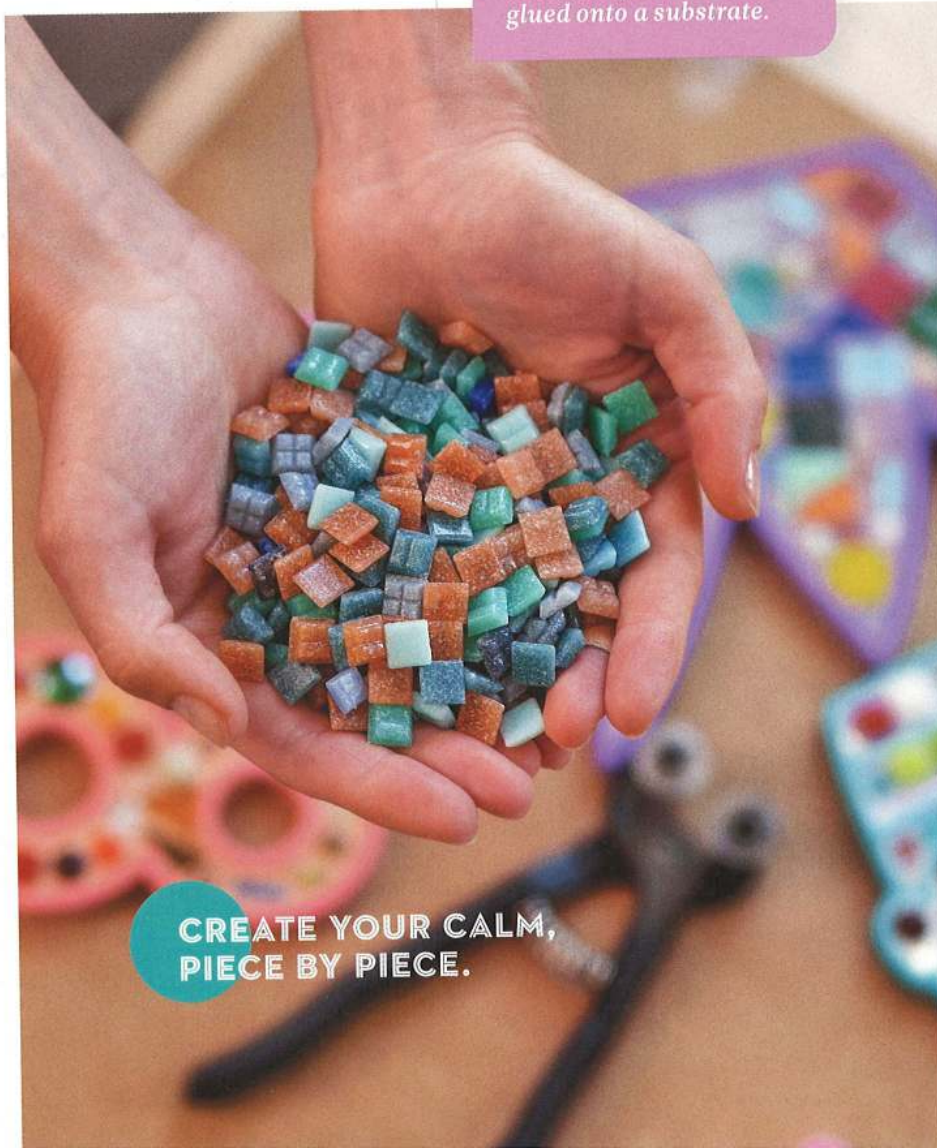
Interested in mastering this ancient craft? You'll need to know these common terms:

Tesserae *Small pieces of glass, tile, porcelain or other found items like buttons or beads used to create mosaic art.*

Substrate *The surface or base that the tesserae is connected to, such as wood, concrete or metal.*

Adhesive *How the tesserae are attached to a substrate. Adhesives can include Thinset, Weldbond or silicone.*

Grout *Cement used to fill the spaces between tesserae after they are glued onto a substrate.*



CREATE YOUR CALM,
PIECE BY PIECE.

then bring their designed work back to the studio for Barnett and her staff to do the finishing cement and grout work. The demand for these kits has been high, and she has even sent kits out of state.

THE MOSAIC MINDSET

Working with broken things to create something of value has astonishing healing potential, says Meghan Walsh, a mosaic artist and architect based in Lowell, Massachusetts. "By working with things that normally would be thrown away, you learn how to frame things with beauty," she says.

This takes on new meaning in times of trouble. "In a pandemic you can begin to say, 'How can I reframe this? What are the

advantages of this thing?' You stop focusing on how awful things are," she says. In a bad situation, you can look at the positives rather than dwell on the negatives, she says.

Walsh adds that making decisions about what material to use, where to place a piece, and how it fits into the larger work, allows a person to make a lot of single point decisions to get to a final product. This helps the artist focus less on anxiety or fear and more on the big picture.

She's seen it in practice. Recently she was working alongside a fellow artist who was scrambling to finish a project. Walsh asked her how she was doing. "I forgot about the coronavirus," the artist admitted,

having been completely immersed in her project.

Cohen has seen this happen as well. "In every class, my student will say 'I worry so much, but not when I'm here. I don't think for one minute about my life outside of this studio. Instead, I'll think about mosaics throughout my day: what material I will use for my next project, what gifts I have to make.'"

Barnett sums up one of the most important lessons she's learned: "With the pandemic, everything got shattered. But with mosaic art, you take something, break it apart and piece it back together. It's a therapeutic process and you end up with something literally concrete and tangible."

MOSAIC ART FOR BEGINNERS

Anyone can create; all you need are a few supplies, some time and some patience. Experts recommend selecting a project based on your knowledge and experience with mosaics. Beginners will do well with simple designs like borders and geometric shapes. Most craft stores, such as Michaels and JoAnn Fabrics, sell all-inclusive kits for beginner projects to help you get started.

If you want to create a more original work, talk to a store employee about which adhesive and grout are best for your project—some fare better outdoors; others are best for indoor projects. Make sure you get supplies that are suitable for the project you

have in mind. These are some of the materials you'll need:

- Wood, concrete or metal base
- Adhesive grout
- Individual tiles
- Glass beads
- Buttons
- Pottery fragments
- Tile nippers
- Safety glasses
- Hammer
- Putty knife
- Paintbrush for adhesive

How to Get Started

1 Start with a simple design and sketch it out on a wooden base. Use a pencil, especially if your project includes clear tiles.

2 Lay out the tiles on the surface. Attach the tiles to the base by applying the adhesive directly to the back of each tile one by one.

3 Allow to dry for 24 hours. Apply the grout, scraping it across the top of the tiles so it fills in the cracks.

4 Use a damp sponge to wipe the grout off the surface of the tiles immediately.

Pro Tip Wear clothes you don't care about. Making mosaics is messy work!

**TAKE IT
APART AND
PUT IT BACK
TOGETHER.**



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