

Throughout my art history training and my long ago travel to Italy, I've been intrigued by mosaics. Having seen the tiny stones or bits of glass (tesserae) on walls and vaulting was like being in a cave with jewels glittering all around you. Their permanence was always astounding to me, too; laid in wet cement, either figurative designs or some sort of decorative pattern, they are a feast for the eyes.

Old Roman mosaics were mostly of colored stones, whereas the beautiful Byzantine works were of glass, often with gold baked into the pieces and set more irregularly so that different lighting would hit the various angles and planes with shimmering results. I remember just staring at the Byzantine facades, especially in Venice, and these were just on someone's home!

Modern technology has added its own unique renditions of mosaics. Yes, they are far different than the exquisite glass mosaics, but just as intriguing to the eye.

In the 1990s, technology buff and then-M.I.T. graduate student, Robert Silvers, created a software program to make mosaics using photographs as the "pieces of glass." Silvers creates recognizable images by taking existing photographs of images relating to the "bigger picture," and having the computer program sort the values of these smaller images so that they "become" the whole, central image. He named this process "photomosaics."

One of my favorites is what seems to be a sepia-toned picture of a tired Abraham Lincoln, but it's really hundreds

of Civil War sepia-toned photographs that, from a viewing distance, become Lincoln. It's dramatic, dynamic and very powerful.

After seeing a few of these images on posters, I borrowed them, along

with a book about Silver's work (*Photomosaics*, Henry Holt & Co., 1997) from a colleague who teaches American history. I brought the book in to show my mixed-media art class.

In almost every class, I do a self-portrait



▲ Courtney Andrews

< Betsy Curtis



## MATERIALS

- School glue
- Illustration board or mat board
- Old brushes for gluing
- Multiple magazines with color pictures
- Posters/books to reference "Photomosaics"
- Art history books to reference traditional mosaics

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will ...

- creatively use color to create the sensation of form.
- choose and use a variety of images that become "them."
- learn a little about mosaics and some art history facts.

# Mosaics of US

by Geri Greenman

trait assignment. I try very hard to vary the approach because I often have the same students in different classes as they travel through their high school career and our art department's curriculum. For this self-portrait, I knew I wanted to combine the mosaic concept with this new technique, but without involving computers.

To begin, I had the students sketch out their faces on newsprint or other inexpensive paper. They then transferred their images to scrap mat board, the surface of which would be strong enough to accept glue and not curl too badly. I mixed school glue with a little water and poured it into old 35mm film containers so the kids each had their own at their desk with which to glue down their "mosaic material."

We then spent lots of time searching through magazines for pages that had colors for skin tone, hair, clothing and so on. We tried to find photographs in magazines of *other* subject matter to make up areas on the por-



▲ Elaine Jackson

◀ Jenny Beeman

color. Another student used minuscule pieces of torn paper with the diligence of a surgeon.

I spent each day as a facilitator. Students came to class with such purpose that all I could do to help them was look through magazines and find pictures of objects that might be in the color family they needed. I would walk around and say "Hey Betsy, this

color for her in photos of ice floes and other snow scenes.

The cutting, tearing and gluing down of these photo bits was tedious. Nevertheless, it was great fun and the students came in every day and got right to it. I can't remember an assignment that my students took to as enthusiastically!

This difficult assignment of a self-portrait was readily accepted by these students, and all of the portraits were outstanding! I was very proud of their accomplishments and they, too, were pleased with the fruit of their efforts.

Once on display, these jewel-like pieces of rich colors, seemingly of faces, were, upon closer examination, mosaics of different subjects creatively manipulated to appear to be "them." ■

*Now retired from teaching, Arts & Activities Contributing Editor Geri Greenman wrote this article when she was art-department head at Willowbrook High School in Villa Park, Ill. Photographs by students Jen Cacioppo and Elaine Jackson.*



traits. They weren't to use a picture of a model's face to use as their face—that would be too simple of a solution.

Each student received a lunch bag to store their pages of color and their "palette" of color choices. Some students ripped the pictures into tiny pieces—what patience! One student found a lot of photographs of red-haired models and used torn pieces of different values of red hair to make up her hair

looks like it would work for the shadow on your neck area..." I found luscious velvet draperies in an architectural magazine and went from desk to desk, asking if someone wanted parts of the picture for their lips.

One student chose to do her face in splintered, angular shapes, giving it a modern twist that she further exaggerated by using violets, orchids and blues. I think I found pieces of