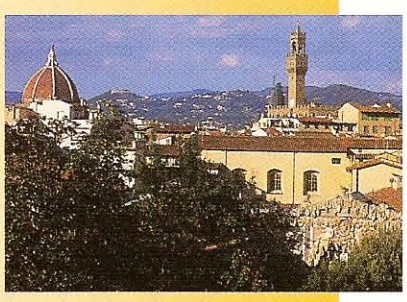


Masters of Mosaic

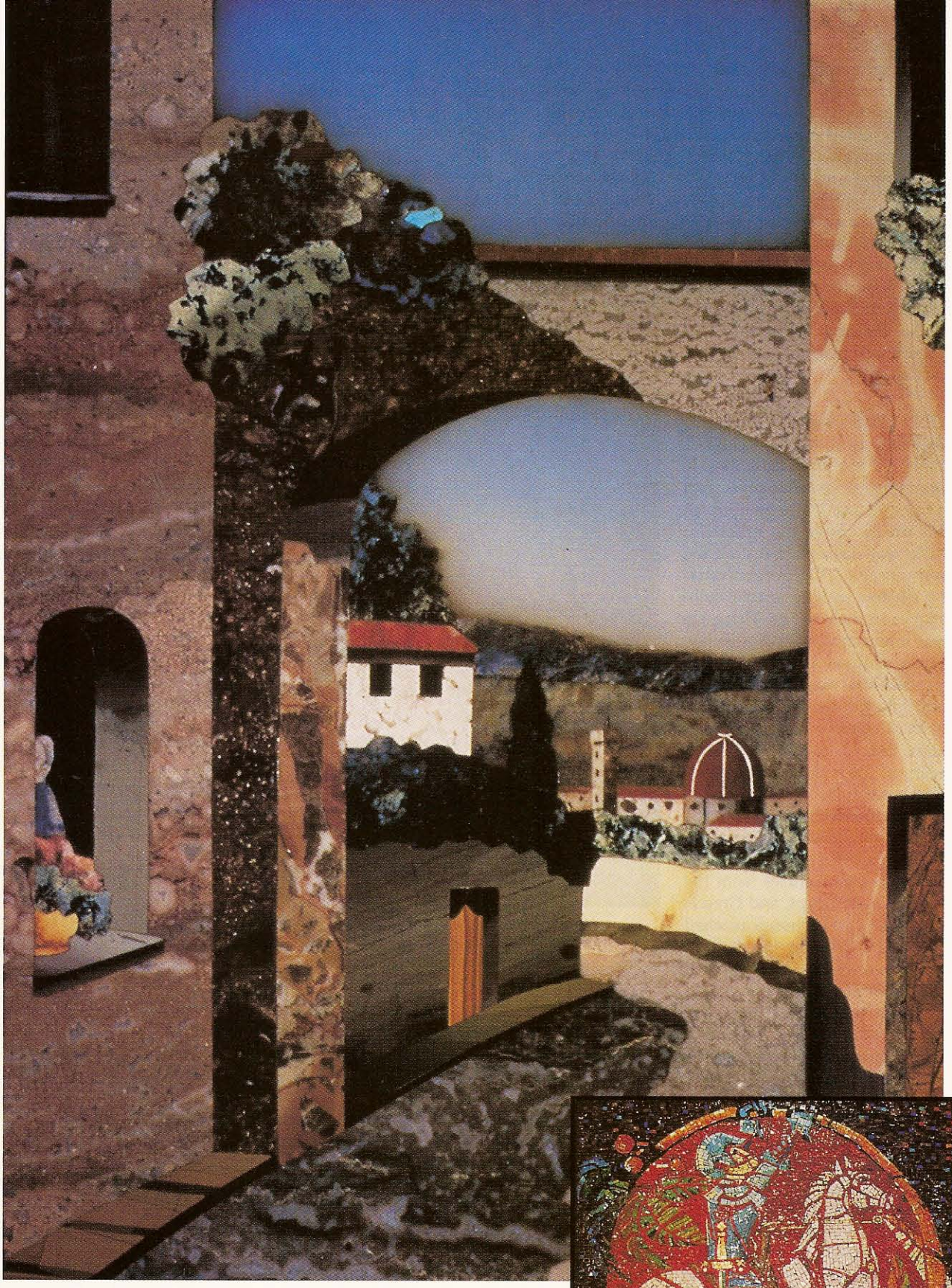
Renaissance and contemporary stone inlays glisten side-by-side in Florence.

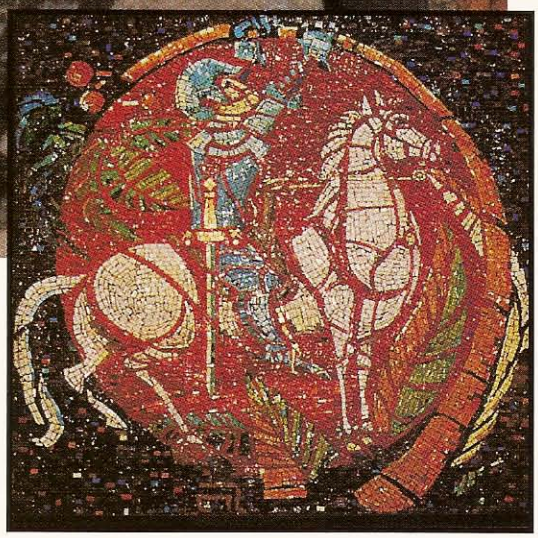
BY ANNIE OSBURN

In the courtyard of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure (literally, "workshop of the hard stones") in Florence, Italy, a huge mound of ancient stone and Roman columns rests in a tumbled heap like a sculptor's untapped marble longing to be carved. Remnants of another time, an era when high Renaissance art flourished in this Italian empire of the Medici family, these stones provide artists and restorers of the Opificio with clues to many of the magnificent inlaid mosaics within the adjoining museum, the Museo dell'Opificio delle Pietre Dure. The complex dates to the late 1700s, established to restore and house three centuries of mosaic work that began with Grand Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici in 1588.

Located in an 18th-century palazzo on an unassuming street around the corner from the Galleria dell'Accademia, within which can be found Michelangelo's *David*, and just a few blocks from Filippo Brunelleschi's red-brick cupola of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in the Piazza del Duomo, the museum houses an exquisite collection of mosaic panels and furniture inlaid with a vast assortment of gemstones cut into the shapes of animals, flowers, and decorative motifs with painterly precision.

Just as the smell of pungent leather seeps into the air along streets and alleyways, mosaics dazzle the eyes throughout this visually overwhelming city. When I stumbled upon the collection inside the Museo, I found at last a comprehensive display of stones and examples of how Italian masters have created mosaics of inlaid hard stones to rival fine paintings in oil.





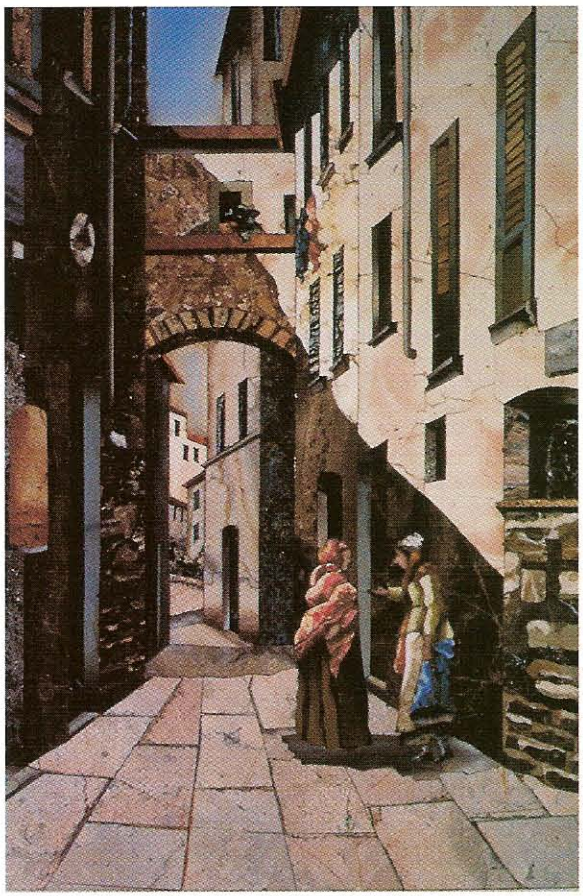
ABOVE: View from S. Giorgio mosaic panel. Photo: courtesy Bottega del Mosaico.

RIGHT: The Knight and the Palm mosaic panel of Murano glass designed by the Assandri Atelier as "an image of success and victory, a symbol of those who are convinced of their own destiny, bending it to their own will." Photo: courtesy of the Assandri Atelier.

OPPOSITE PAGE,TOP: Florence, Italy, as seen from an upstairs window in the Pitti Palace. Photo: Annie Osburn.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: The facade of the church of Santo Spirito mosaic. Photo: courtesy Bottega del Mosaico.

My efforts to photograph and learn more, however, assumed a certain *commedia italiana*. On the day of my visit, using sign language and broken Italian to communicate, I finally resigned myself to returning two days later to meet Dottore Maurizio Michelucci, head of the workshop's restoration and study efforts, who, I was assured, spoke English. Upon my return, however, though Dott. Michelucci graciously agreed to meet with me, he did not speak English, either. We conducted our interview more or less in French with the odd bit of Italian or English to piece together the story in a fashion that can only be described, of course, as mosaic.



ABOVE: Via dei Cappellari mosaic panel. Photo: courtesy Bottega del Mosaico.
RIGHT: Yellow rosebud opening and rose in full flower mosaic panel. Photo: courtesy Bottega del Mosaico.

ON THIS WARM summer morning, Dott. Michelucci trustingly led me up a steep marble stairway, smoking a pipe with professorlike introspection, to his office above the museum. "It's very difficult to restore the old mosaics. They were created by masters with the special techniques in their hands. There are not many mosaic artists today, many of them are older. It is a process that is very expensive and takes much time to make," said Michelucci, stressing that stone today is *trè, trè cher*. "Now, many of the tools are more modern, but not always. The old mosaics at the Opificio are restored with much the same materials as they were created."

Known to cultures from the Middle East, Egypt, and Greece, the ancient art of mosaic reached its zenith during the Italian Renaissance when mosaic panel decorations evolved into an art form for the social elite. Great public baths, villas of the aristocracy, churches and government buildings adopted these rich decorations to convey status and wealth.

The Opificio unites an ancient and noble tradition with burgeoning modern technology. The present center for conservation and restoration is dependent on the Ministry of Culture, which is seated in Florence and operates throughout Italy. Under the direction of an art historian, with its School for Restoration and its leading scientific laboratory, the Opificio employs 60 restorers, including art historians, scientists, and laboratory technicians, and oversees historic cultural preservation throughout the Italian state.

In its historic building on Via degli Alfani, the more traditional type of restoration laboratories (stone, mosaic, and glyptics, i.e., engraving or carving) operate alongside others of more recent date (ceramics, stucco, plaster work, and wax). Although at one time a working artistic production center for mosaics, the Opificio has transformed into a center for restoration of intarsia, mosaic, sculptural, and manufactured stone objects. The department of mosaics and glyptics, where ancient techniques are still practiced, is capable of restoring the art of *pietra dura* to a level which, according to the Opificio, only it can attain. This skill is due to leading craftsmen and a remarkable collection of precious materials that dates back to the time of the powerful Medici family.

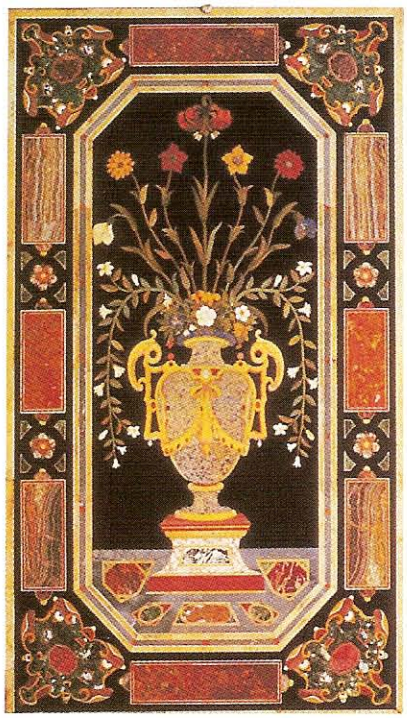
Dott. Michelucci, an archaeologist and expert in the restoration of Roman and Greek sculptures and mosaics, grants my request to see the laboratories, a large, airy space, which we enter through glass-paned doors. In the main room, our footsteps echo among long worktables with restorations in progress. An 18th-century marble sculpture by Donatello shares space with mosaic panels from Tuscan cathedrals, a marble sculpture of a lion (hoping someone will repair his nose, which lies in a small pile of stone fragments by his tail), and another sculpture that Dott. Michelucci says may be a Michelangelo. In another room, we find mosaic restorations, including a panel from the church of Santa Maria Novella. Along the walls are samples of rare stones and mosaic studies.

The amount of restoration carried out by the laboratories increased progressively in the 1870s and 1880s when a revival of Florentine mosaics occurred. Today, the work embraces all types of mosaic and intarsia, glass and stone. Specializing in these techniques has made possible the restoration of other related objects, such as *scagliola* (an imitation of ornamental marble made from gypsum), ivories, mother-of-pearl, coral, and amber.

The Museo dell'Opificio is its own hidden gem. While many visitors to Florence rush to see *David* or the Uffizi Gallery, they may never know that a complete history of time laid in stone is recorded nearby. Toward the end of the 18th century, the still very active laboratories of the Opificio moved from the Uffizi to its present address. (Another Medici, the Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, commissioned the building of the Uffizi ["offices"] just off the

Piazza della Signoria along the Arno in the mid-16th century. Now known as the Uffizi Gallery, the massive, three-sided building houses the most impressive collection of art in Italy, and perhaps the world.)

Among the more notable items in the museum are a series of 17th-century panels in pietra dura intended for the Chapel of the Princes; a portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici, based on a painting by Domenico Passignano (1597), which is one of the earliest examples of Florentine mosaics, having been created in 1598; sophisticated 18th-century gem-carving equipment; and a rare sample collection of precious marbles and other stones required for pietra dura work that has been used for hundreds of years.



ABOVE: Laboratories of the stone materials restoration department of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. Photo: courtesy of the Opifico. RIGHT: A mosaic panel in pietre dure of a vase with flowers from the early 17th century. Photo: courtesy of the Opificio.

Alabasters and agates reflect pastoral Tuscan countrysides and cobblestone streets arched with skies of lapis lazuli. A fine piece of blue-and-white onyx can all but replicate the rushing currents of a river. Agate from the Arno duplicates the facades of ancient buildings and chalcedony creates lush Tuscan hillsides. Using stone as a painter manipulates pigment, mosaic masters create a highly polished canvas.

In the upstairs gallery, one entire wall of 12 glass cases displays row upon row of stone samples used in classic Florentine mosaic and identifies their countries of origin. I see alabaster slices from the Orient, Voltera, and the Arno River; green basalt from Verona and basalt from Sweden; labradorite; quartz; tiger's-eye; granite from Sweden, Siberia, the Orient, Scotland, and Elba Island, a magical paradise just off the coast of Italy floating in the Tyrrhenian Sea. But there's more: chalcedony; rhyolite; agate from Germany, Sardinia and Siena; malachite from Siberia; lapis lazuli from France and Persia; azurite from America; amethyst; rhodonite; chrysoprase from Porta Santa.

Just as Luigi Barzini writes in his book, *The Italians*, I was a tourist ready to devour anything with greedy, drunken eyes. While walking through the Museo's rooms, I longed to touch the sleek, polished surfaces and wished I had a magnifying glass to catch the all-but-invisible seams between stones. I longed to photograph the images, but disdained the bad habit of my fellow tourists who readily wielded their flash bulbs and touched fine works of art, in spite of numerous signs prohibiting these transgressions.

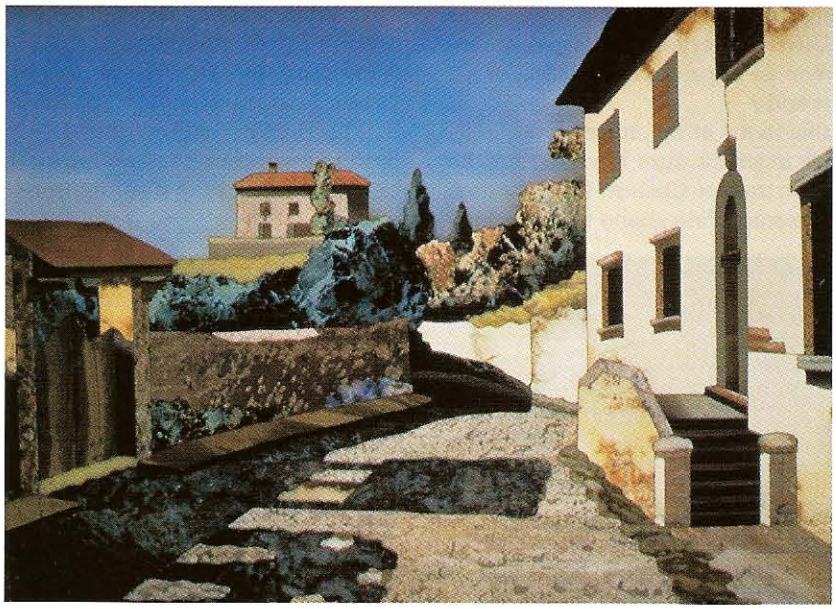
ONE OF THE BEST collections of contemporary mosaics in Florence using traditional methods can be found at Bottega del Mosaico, a shop on Via Guicciardini across from the Pitti Palace, that icon of Medici opulence. After a long walk in the Boboli Gardens behind the palace, I strolled into the Bottega del Mosaico gallery and met its owner, Andrea Cavini, who is filled with enthusiasm for mosaics. Many of the stone buildings on this legendary street were once workshops for the Medici, established for their stable of artisans who produced mosaics and other items prized by the noble family.

Today, the works of fewer than a dozen mosaic artists are on display at Bottega del Mosaico, including Renzo Scarpelli, Marco Paci, Fantechi and Francesco Cornazzani, and, one of the most prolific, Alfredo Buccioni. The gallery, which opened in 1957, was one of the first to display contemporary Florentine mosaics using traditional methods.

According to Cavini, only a handful of mosaic artists exist today who carry on the traditions of that era. Of these, the youngest may be in his 50s, with no strong protégés in sight. But this is August, the month when Europeans desert their cities and flood the Mediterranean coasts and countrysides. No mosaic artists are to be found, only the creations they have left behind.

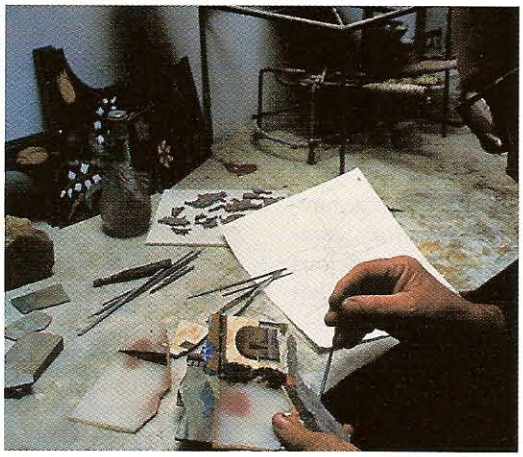
"The ancient mosaic tradition is known only to a few artists," says Cavini. "The art of Florentine mosaic is unique in the world. Flourishing 500 years ago at the court of the Medici, it has been handed down by a select group of crafts-

men, generation to generation, through the centuries." In their mosaics, as precise as a painting, they create forms and colors with small fragments of stone called *tesserae* that are cut and laid into a base side by side, to create dynamic patterns. Shades, veining, and other color gradations of individual stones are used to emulate the subtle nuances of shadows, shading, or natural textures.



ABOVE: View of Fort Belvedere mosaic panel. Photo: courtesy Bottega del Mosaico.
BELOW: Florentine mosaic artist places cut stone in place for finished design. Photo: courtesy Bottega del Mosaico.

An initial, detailed drawing may precede the mosaic, outlining major areas by creating a cartoon. From this cartoon, patterned shapes are cut which guide the cutting of the stone. Roughly cut into sections three millimeters thick, the stone pieces are then sawed by hand using patterned cards as a base and model. The saws are the same as those used in the 16th century, a cherry branch bent to form a bow with an iron wire stretched across, end to end, and moistened with water and abrasive powder for use. Finally, the mosaic pieces are glued in place with adhesive to a slate tablet and then polished.



"Although present-day mosaics are secured with glues, mosaics of the 16th, 17th and 18th century used beeswax," adds Cavini. "Glue is not as good because it can crack the stone. All of the mosaic work is done with infinite care and patience, but problems may arise, such as stones which seem beautiful on the surface may prove to be full of sand or flaky when cut, easily broken or change color when exposed to light.

"Every mosaic artist has his own specialty and style, but they all use the traditional tools. It's very difficult to cut the lines perfectly. The masters work with such fine lines between the stone that you can hardly see the lines or the glue when it's assembled," says Cavini, showing me a floral mosaic in which the petals of a golden rose deepen so convincingly, I can hardly believe they're stone.

Florentine mosaics are displayed in the world's most famous museums, including the Palazzo Pitti and the Uffizi Gallery of Florence, the Prado of Spain, and the British Museum. Like glass is to Venetian masters, the art of traditional mosaics rests firmly in the hands of Florentine master craftsmen.

FURTHER SOUTH, while wandering down a winding cobblestone street on a humid August evening in Rome's Campo dei Fiori district, I stumbled across another example of Italian mosaics. These, contemporary in theme and design, are created by the Assandri Atelier, a small studio with two principal designers: Claudio Assandri and Professor Emilio Rodriguez-Almeida, a mosaic artist, archaeologist, and art historian.

Seeking refuge for my weary feet and trying to forget an unsuccessful attempt at dinner, I found myself in the Assandri studio on Vicolo dei Bovari, just off of Piazza del Paradiso, warmly greeted by owner Claudio Assandri, whose studio revealed bright, colorful, and highly textural mosaics, unlike the glasslike surfaces of their 16th-century counterparts. Incorporating variously hued marbles, the Assandri mosaics are created mostly from Murano glass from the fabled Venetian island, sometimes mixed with alabster, soapstone, a quartz, or other stone, and clearly show the influence of 20th-century design. These mosaics are set with a composite cementing agent and constructed on movable panels of wood or iron as a base, which can be incorporated into walls, doors, or floors, or simply hung like paintings.

Operating as a design studio, the Assandri Atelier creates mosaics that are one-of-a-kind, although several editions of one design may be created. Many of the old techniques are used, but 20th-century technology has allowed the Assandri Atelier to project its virtual gallery across the World Wide Web, offering the concept of "virtual installations" (www.gedi.it/assandri).

"We are not merchants or artisans," says Assandri. "We are creators of modern art. We choose to diffuse our artworks through today's means of communication. Culturally, mosaic art is forever. Our mosaics are tightly attached to modern art by a mixture of abstraction and figurative imagery. We combine the techniques of antiquity with a modern artistic mode."

Antiquity combined with modernism is much the daily fare in ancient Italian cities these days. On my journey, it seemed, I was never far from the rich patterns of stone, be it a mosaic; a crooked, light-splashed lane; a cathedral; or a Mediaeval village accessible only by foot. The stone pictures I discovered — whether smooth, realistic, and centuries-old or textural and contemporary — conveyed to me the essence of what propels so many of us into the fatal charm of Italy. ◆