

What is a mosaic?





A mosaic is a picture or pattern made from small pieces of colourful stone or other materials. Mosaics are used to decorate floors, walls, ceilings and precious objects.

Greek floor mosaic from around AD 200





Mosaics can be made from glass, stone, gemstones, shell, ivory, mother-of-pearl, marble, limestone or other natural materials. The pieces can be cut using special tools. Modern mosaics can include found objects, such as broken crockery. Pieces of a mosaic are held in place by adhesive and grout.

Image from: Shutterstock editorial/Dmitry Chulov





Mosaics are fixed in place. History has shown that mosaics are strong and can last a long time under the right conditions. Mosaics can also be practical, as they are waterproof, making them perfect for bathrooms.

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How have mosaics developed over time?





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Mesopotamian

Mosaics were first used over 4000 years ago in Mesopotamia, western Asia, to decorate and strengthen walls and columns. Pointed clay cones, or nails, were painted in different colours and pushed into clay to make decorative patterns.

Clay cone mosaics, c3000 BC





Ancient Greek

The ancient Greeks used pebbles to decorate their pavements and floors. They also used tiles in specific shapes, sizes and colours to make mosaics. These tiles were called tesserae. Ancient Greek mosaics often had images of gods or heroes from Greek mythology.

Pebble mosaic, c400–350 BC





Mosaic representing a dove, AD 320

Roman

To the Romans, mosaics were a luxury. Wealthy Romans used them to decorate their villas. They also introduced countries in the Roman Empire to mosaics, including Britain. Mosaics of heroes, gods, gladiators, mythology, domestic scenes, nature and animals were popular, as well as geometric designs.





Mosaic decoration on the Dome of the Rock
in Jerusalem, Israel, AD 720

Islamic

Mosaics in Islamic architecture contain no religious imagery as, in Islam, it is disrespectful to create art of religious figures. Instead, mosaics often follow the mathematical principals of Zillij, a style using symmetrical patterns to reflect the beauty and holiness of Allah.





Mosaic image of Jesus Christ Pantocrator,
1145–1160

Byzantine

As Christianity replaced the Roman state religion, Byzantine churches were built. Mosaics of religious figures were made to cover their walls and ceilings. Gold ‘smalti’ tiles were used so that flickering candlelight make them glow. They were not usually grouted, so that light could reflect off their edges.





Mesoamerican

The Aztecs used a precious blue-green stone called turquoise to make masks with mosaic faces. Many of these were made to represent the gods that the Aztec people worshipped, such as Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire, day and heat.

Mosaic turquoise mask, 1400–1521





Art Nouveau

During the Art Nouveau movement, Antoni Gaudí used mosaics to decorate buildings in Barcelona. He used fragments of colourful stone, marble, enamel and ceramics in his mosaics, as well as broken crockery and found objects.

Mosaic decoration by Antoni Gaudí in Park Güell, Barcelona, Spain, 1890–1922





Mosaic at Tottenham Court Road Underground station in London, UK, 1986

Modern

A wide range of materials, such as glass, stone and found object, make up modern mosaics. Mosaics can still be found in public places. A lot of people might have mosaic-style decorations in their homes, such as on their floors or bathroom walls.

