

Featuring the latest from the
Society of American Mosaic Artists

Bridging Cultures through Mosaic Art Laurel True Creating Participatory Projects with Communities in Turkey



by Shawn Newton

Photography by Laurel True

The Society of American Mosaic Artists (SAMA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating, inspiring, and promoting excellence in the mosaic arts. Founded in 1999, its more than 900 members include mosaic artists at all levels, mosaic aficionados, collectors, materials suppliers, and art educators.

SAMA has put renewed emphasis on strengthening ties with other international mosaic organizations to pursue common goals and develop new programs relevant to its diverse membership. To further this goal, Global Mosaic Project founder and SAMA member, Laurel True, was recently chosen in a competitive selection process to be an arts ambassador to Turkey through the International Community Mural Arts Program. The aim of this U.S. Department of State and Meridian International Center program is to foster artistic cultural diplomacy in specific regions of the world through cross-cultural community engagement.

The first mural project was located in Beykoz, on the outskirts of Istanbul, and focused on the themes of peace, understanding, gender equality, and youth empowerment. True requested that teenage girls from a local vocational school be permitted to participate in the group's creation of the façade for a municipality building in a busy plaza. The project stakeholders approved a design symbolic of bridging cultures and unity that was inspired by the bridges spanning the Bosphorus as well as the natural elements of Turkish decorative arts.

Getting to Work

The teenage girls were shy at first but soon warmed up and became a great group with lots of high energy. They eagerly learned the techniques for cutting and arranging the pieces of tile and glass, using the pre-enlarged patterns that True had prepared. While breaking tiles, everyone shared laughter, support, and tea—lots of tea in Turkey.

With in-depth lessons and demos, the girls' mosaic setting skills improved quickly. Word about the project spread to another girls vocational school, and soon the amount of participants swelled to numbers that exceeded the capacity of the space, interfering with effectively teaching and monitoring techniques. True called on a previous student and associate from Istanbul, Ozgur Ozer, to join the project as a co-facilitator, and she proved to be a great role model for the girls.



(Top to bottom) Detail image of the Tulip mural in progress
and of the mosaic wall mural in Beykoz, Turkey.

Installing the Mural

The design elements completed, it was time to move outside and transfer them onto the wall using a combination of grid technique and templates. True shared: "It was so great to be outside, working with the team. We experienced people walking by every day—hundreds it seemed—saying things such as "blessings to your hands" and wonderful things like that. People from all walks of life, young and old, were complimenting us, saying how they loved watching the mural develop. The girls were really proud, and the people were proud as well to see the girls working on the project.

"I could tell that the mosaic techniques were really clicking in for them. At the end of the project, I asked for a show of hands of how many girls thought they would continue to work with mosaic art. Every hand shot up into the air!"

To celebrate the mural's completion, the municipality brought in traditional Turkish musicians, tents, and flags. In attendance were town officials, members of the press, the girls, teachers, and citizens of Beykoz. The mural is now a popular photo site for community members, newlyweds, and families.

On to Ankara

True worked with a small group of selected young art students to create a mural for the façade of a building at their art school at Gazi University. The design for the project, developed with student collaboration, emphasized diversity, connection, and the importance of "looking deeper." Using both stencils and ceramic tile, the text read: Bakiyor Musun? Goruyor Musun? (Are You Looking? Are You Seeing?)

The students were inspired by the street art that True had recently done and her use of mirror in relief and toned down colors. The left side of the mural reflected a night scape with pointed, linear forms, and the right side included a day scape with flowing organic lines and colorful kaleidoscopic forms. The use of mirror and glass further enhanced the concept of self-reflection and perspective.

True described the process of communicating. "At times, the group and I had to struggle to get our points across to each other without translation. Basic things were easy, using gestures and charades, but more complex ideas, aesthetic choices, and conceptual stuff were much more challenging. My students managed to conjure up more English than I had previously heard out of them. As I speak no Turkish beyond a few words and phrases—please hand me the scissors only gets you so far—these guys had to really reach. I have to say that it was a success and very rewarding.

"As a foreigner, my approach and creative philosophy were very different from what my students were used to. Sometimes I know they thought I was a nut. They were kind of scandalized by my use of color, but that made for some good jokes and inspiring exchanges."

Dedication

The U.S. Embassy and Gazi Art Faculty held the dedication ceremony, which was attended by embassy representatives, art faculty, students, friends, and the creation team. The media department at Gazi presented True with a time-lapse, three-minute film.

True congratulated her students for their graceful, open, and intelligent approach to art making as well as their positive participation in this cross-cultural exchange mural project. The experience provided a wonderful example of fostering mutual understanding and peace through the power of art.

True summarized the experience. "It was life changing! All the projects that I do are so special in their own unique ways. My time in Turkey had a very deep impact on me, and the many Turkish people I met were welcoming, warm, thoughtful, and kind on all levels."

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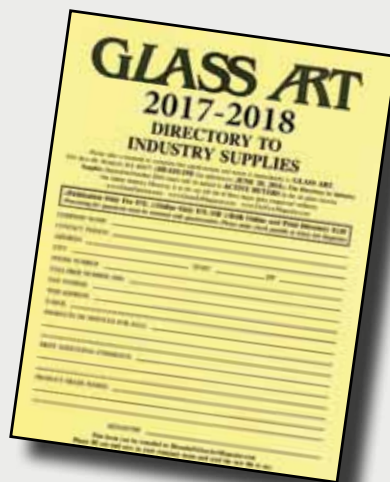
Laurel True specializes in community-based public art and works with worldwide communities to create mosaic murals and street art that have cultural significance. A link to the film mentioned above can be found at www.truemosaics.com.

Visit www.americanmosaics.org for more information on the Society of American Mosaic Artists and its goals.

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