ITALY

The birthplace of the world's mosaics

by Pierpaolo Mittica

The Tagliamento River where today stones are still selected and gathered for producing the mosaics. The Tagliamento River, spanning around 170km and with its vast river basin of almost 3000 km², is considered to be the only one in the entire Alpine arc, and one of few in Europe, to preserve its original morphology of interwoven channels.

THE SPILIMBERGO SCHOOL: A CENTURY OF ART AND EXCELLENCE

What do the National Opera in Paris, the Library of Congress in Washington, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem have in common? The answer is that their walls are adorned with works from the world's most important school of mosaic, which is located in Spilimbergo, a small village in Friuli on the banks of the Tagliamento River.

The school, which this year celebrates the one hundredth anniversary of its creation (it was founded in 22 January 1922) is inspired by a centuries-old tradition – the Friuli workers' seasonal migration to Venice, the symbol par excellence of the artistic crossroads between East and West. In the Venetian Republic the mosaic tradition was an esteemed fusion of Roman and Byzantine influences. Here the craftsmen of Spilimbergo learned the art of mosaic but also the importance of selecting and gathering their stones in the riverbeds of the Meduna and the Tagliamento. With emigration in the 1800s the mosaic craftsmen of Spilimbergo took their art everywhere, from France to the United States, Canada to Venezuela, Argentina and Australia.

Created in the wake of this notoriety, and conceived to provide training to the young emigrants, the Friuli School of Mosaic is today an international reference point for mosaic art. Every day its students, from 22 different nations, blend study with practical experimentation, enjoying access to the most innovative technologies and collaborating with leading designers. And their work gets displayed all over the world.

In the hall of the University of Trieste are situated mosaics created in 1942 by the Friuli School of Mosaic in Spilimbergo (near Pordenone) in collaboration with Trieste artist Ugo Carà.

First-year students use hammers to cut the mosaic tiles. During the first year of the course, students focus mainly on the history of mosaic, learning to produce mosaics according to the ancient Greek and Roman traditions.

At the entrance to the town of Spilimbergo (near Pordenone) the name is written in mosaic produced by the Friuli School of Mosaic.

Spilimbergo (near Pordenone). The temple dedicated to the fallen of the Great War spans a vast surface covered in mosaics. A woman is depicted writing the names of those who departed from Spilimbergo and died defending their country. Next to her, a young man holding in his hand an olive branch represents hope for the future and peace. At the centre is the statue of Winged Victory. With these figures in 1928 the painter Umberto Martina depicted the concept of memory, pain, peace and honour that was to be evoked in the monuments to the fallen that were being built all over Italy. To execute the mosaics Umberto Martina turned to maestro Gino Avon who at that time had his own workshop but was also a teacher at the Friuli School of Mosaic.

Mosaic expert Cristina De Leoni teaches a lesson with second-year students. The programme for the second year of the course is concentrated on various techniques. First, students try the Byzantine mosaic technique copying or interpreting figurative and ornamental medieval subjects with enamels and gold pieces. Then there is a more in-depth study of the reverse technique proposed in the second half of the 1800s by Gian Domenico Facchina, who originated in Sequals, a town not far from Spilimbergo. Using this technique, subjects of a Mannerist, virtuoso, modernist and academic nature are depicted in mosaic. The contemporary technique is also introduced with the depiction of 20th century figurative subjects.

Work on *Light, Movement, Colour*, the mosaic commemorating 100 years of the Friuli School of Mosaic, designed by Giulio Candussio and produced by third-year students and those from the advanced courses along with the teachers Luca De Amicis and Francesco Anchora.

First-year students select stones and pebbles in the bed of the Tagliamento River for producing mosaic works.

The store of raw materials, stones, pebbles, wood and recycled materials for the creation of mosaics.

A third-year student. During the third year of the course, modern mosaics are created that can express new designs or interpret contemporary works of art. The students experiment with mosaic styles focusing on materials, space, light, colour and movement. The cutting of the tiles is more open to interpretation so dimensions and thickness can vary as students play with the effects of protrusion and intrusion, creating new textures. Scientific theories on perception and vision are put into practice in identifying methods for working and research. Students have opportunities to experience in-depth study and contact with contemporary art thanks to internships with artists and designers.

Light, Movement, Colour, the work to commemorate 100 years since the foundation of the Friuli School of Mosaic; it was designed by Giulio Candussio and produced by third-year students and those from the advanced courses along with the teachers Luca De Amicis and Francesco Anchora.

The store of enamels and gold pieces at the Friuli School of Mosaic.

Pieces of mosaic and glass ready to be used by the students to create mosaics.

A third-year student creates a mosaic. During the third year of the course, modern mosaics are created that can express new designs or interpret contemporary works of art. The students experiment with mosaic styles focusing on materials, space, light, colour and movement. The cutting of the tiles is more open to interpretation so dimensions and thickness can vary as students play with the effects of protrusion and intrusion, creating new textures. Scientific theories on perception and vision are put into practice in identifying methods for working and research. Students have opportunities to experience in-depth study and contact with contemporary art thanks to internships with artists and designers.

The entrance hall to the Friuli School of Mosaic in Spilimbergo (near Pordenone).

Students enjoy a break from lessons at the Friuli School of Mosaic.

Third-year students assemble a design that will serve to produce the work *Light*, *Movement*, *Colour* to commemorate 100 years of the Friuli School of Mosaic; it was designed by Giulio Candussio and produced by third-year students and those from the advanced courses along with the teachers Luca De Amicis and Francesco Anchora.

Spilimbergo (near Pordenone). Mosaic works created by the Friuli School of Mosaic in the small town. On the left is a mosaic version of the work *Le Vin du monde* by Jean Lurçat, on the right a mosaic version of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Fragments of tesserae used by students of the Friuli School of Mosaic to make mosaics.

Stefano Lovison, the Dean of the Friuli School of Mosaic in Spilimbergo.

A store of enamels and gold tiles at the Friuli School of Mosaic in Spilimbergo.

Students make a mosaic dome during a *terrazzo* lesson. The *terrazzo* course lasts three academic years and becomes increasingly complex and difficult as it progresses. The course includes the study of the application and posing of mosaics, execution and construction of models and three-dimensional plaster casts, as well as the creation of traditional and innovative floor mosaics, from Venetian floors to *graniglia* and mosaics, as well as combinations of them. In recent years the introduction of new, technologically advanced materials has reinvigorated the genre, leading to continuous experimentation.

Spilimbergo (near Pordenone). The Friuli School of Mosaic complex includes the school and two buildings used as a museum.

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