

David James at work
in Olicana Mosaics'
Yorkshire studio.

Piece by Piece

Artist David James creates intricate outdoor mosaics from natural materials to enhance both public and private gardens

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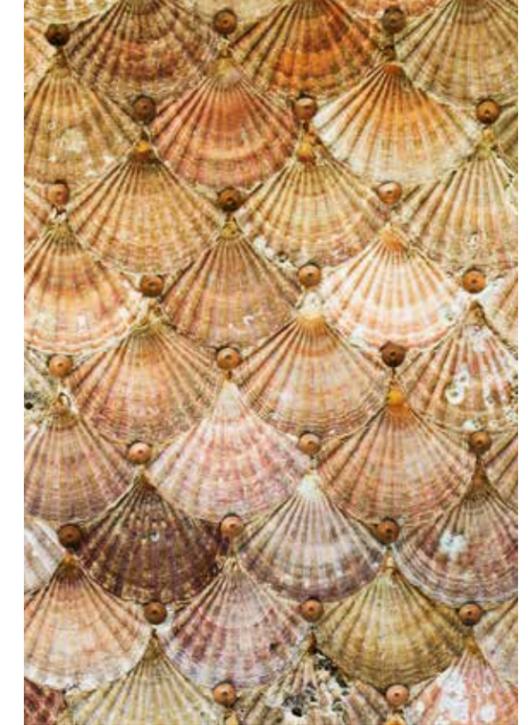
Using simple shapes taken from nature in the form of shells and pebbles or cut pieces of smalti, a richly coloured specialist glass manufactured in Venice, artist David James creates mosaic features that fit so seamlessly into his clients' gardens that they appear to have been there for ever. "The work is always part of an environment, so I need to be aware of what is already there, whether that's architectural references, the hard landscaping or the planting," explains David.

Describing himself as "an artist who happens to make mosaics, sculptures and other garden features", he completed a degree in graphic design at Leeds Metropolitan University before embarking on a career in commercial design. While he was ascending the corporate ranks, he retained his enthusiasm for drawing and painting, and on holidays in Italy and Turkey, he became fascinated by the ancient mosaics that are common in those countries. "I was very

Right David uses antique dividers and charcoal to draw out the design in the studio.

Below Small mosaic tiles sorted into trays.

Bottom A hand-operated chopping machine cuts slabs of smalti or marble into smaller pieces.



the old ways are the best," he adds.

After an initial consultation with a client, David hand draws the design, using ink pen and a watercolour wash. Once this has been approved, the template

Clockwise from above Perfectly arranged scallop shells make a decorative screen; using a hammer and hardie to trim pieces to size; pebbles are graded into similar sizes and colours; each piece of stone or smalti is cut by hand.

is transferred to the computer. "Although art has always been my headline subject, there is quite a lot of geometry involved in creating a precise design," he explains. "I've come to see a beauty in the maths."

The mosaics are made in his studio rather than on site. David sketches out the design onto at least one wooden mould, using antique dividers and a stick of charcoal to make the precise measurements. If it is a large piece, the design is split up into more than one section to make it manageable for transportation and installation by the landscapers. "I need to consider the size, weight and shape of each part of the pattern before deciding how it will be sectioned," says David of this part of his process.

The materials depend on the project and the client's wishes. "I will either use found objects, such as pebbles and shells, or I use tessellated smalti and marble," he adds. For a pebble-based mosaic, David orders materials from an approved supplier (it is illegal to gather pebbles from beaches in the UK) and grades them into similar sizes. "There is a lot of grading and a lot of listening to Radio 4 while I'm doing it, although I do have a very supportive wife, Caroline, who helps me behind the scenes," he smiles. The colour of the pebbles needs to be uniform. "I don't seal or varnish them, so I need to consider how they will look when they are wet as well as when they're dry." Formers are put down and the pebbles

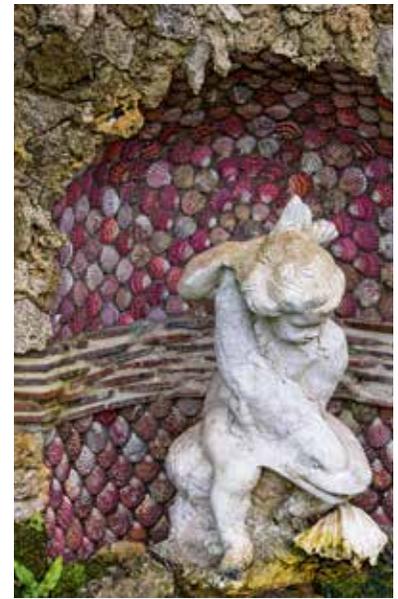


interested in the original techniques that were used to make them, and one day, I thought I'd give it a go," recalls David. "Many people use ceramics or vitreous glass, but I wanted to learn the classical way." From 2003, he attended several courses in the Italian city of Ravenna, learning specific Roman and Byzantine mosaic techniques. "I produced one, then I made a second, and then someone commissioned me to make one for them. Fairly soon afterwards, the Royal Horticultural Society picked me up on its radar. Several years later as commission work increased, mosaics became my full-time occupation."

Now David's multiple award-winning work can be seen in large spaces, such as the gardens at RHS Garden Harlow Carr in Yorkshire, in the public realm, as well as in the gardens of private clients. He is also a regular exhibitor at the Chelsea Flower Show. Currently, he is working on a major commission for 2018 to create two pieces for The Laskett Gardens, created by Sir Roy Strong and his late wife, Julia Trevelyan Oman, in Herefordshire. "I usually have around four to six projects on the go at any one time," says David. "Each one takes between three to six months to complete."

His permanent base is a three-room workshop in Ilkley, Yorkshire, near to his home. "The process of making is fairly low-tech because I have found that





are placed. "It's a bit like dry stone walling, you look for the stone that's best suited to the space you have," says David. Once the giant pebble work puzzle is complete, they are fixed in place with a construction grade specialist material that is resistant to frost.

To make a mosaic from marble or smalti, which arrive in large slabs, David cuts the shapes for his design using a chopping machine to slice the material into manageable pieces. Hand operated, with a set of six-inch blades, the machine is powerful enough to slice the marble with a single crunch. David then employs a traditional hammer in a demi-lune shape, combined with a hardie, an up-ended chisel that fits into a wooden block that acts as a shock absorber.

Whether he's sifting through 5,000 scallop shells to find 350 of the same size to create a screen for York Gate Garden in Leeds, or grading a heap of smooth grey pebbles to make one of his one-off carpet mosaic designs, David requires a gimlet eye for detail. "It can't look too homespun," he explains. "It's a constant balancing process. This is a seven days a week job, really, because I don't switch off from my projects. I'm constantly figuring out how a piece will work in the space, practically as well as aesthetically."

Collaboration is key to success in his work, continues David. "One of the nicest parts of the job is the people I get to work with. It could be a couple down the road with a courtyard garden or a huge project in the USA. "Whatever I create is as much about the client as it is about me." ■

For more about David's craft at *Olicana Mosaics*, tel: 07980 086266; olicanamosaics.co.uk