

# Mosaic Masters:

## Jonathan Mandell

and

## Gina Hubler

by Shawn Waggoner

In recent years, mosaic has experienced a renaissance. But much of what the general public sees falls into the category of functional objects, like tables, benches and garden stepping-stones. There are artists working in the medium, creating groundbreaking works of fine art that draw upon mosaic's illustrious history as a liturgical art form, while simultaneously breaking new ground in terms of content, size and location.

Meet two of those artists, Jonathan Mandell and Gina Hubler.



*"Nisqually I," Jonathan Mandell, 48" x 48" x 3", 2001. This mosaic was made with glass shards from work that glass artist Dale Chihuly lost in the Nisqually earthquake last year. Additionally, it features a snowflake obsidian (volcanic glass) sky with spheres carved from rhodonite, labradorite, moss agate, and yellow jasper. Inside the mouth of the vessel that lies on the ground, is a bed of amethyst crystals. The nude figure is made from three varieties of marble. Part of the proceeds from the sale of this mosaic will go to CERF (Craft Emergency Relief Fund) to help artists whose studios were devastated by the effects of the earthquake.*



*"Nisqually II," Jonathan Mandell, 48" x 48" x 3", 2001. This mosaic was made with glass shards from work that glass artist Sonja Blomdahl lost in the Nisqually earthquake last year. This abstracted landscape, in addition to Blomdahl's glass, features a variety of semiprecious stones and minerals. The forms on the horizon are made of (from left to right) golden tiger eye, fossilized algae, yellow dendrite, leopard skin jasper, unakite, fancy jasper, and mookite jasper. The forms in the basin beneath the waterfall are made of turquoise, septarian jasper and agate. Part of the proceeds from the sale of this mosaic will go to CERF (Craft Emergency Relief Fund) to help artists whose studios were devastated by the effects of the earthquake.*

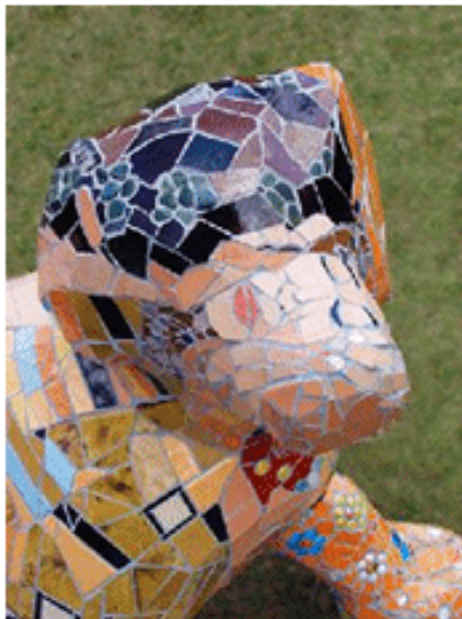
### Jonathan Mandell

"Movement is often my ultimate expression," says Mandell.

For a medium that is usually thought of as static and staid, this unusual approach attracts both collectors of fine art and architects to Mandell's mosaics. Since the late '80s, he has been producing liturgical architectural commissions as well as fine art panels using a process that can be traced back 4,000 years.

After sketching and painting his subject, Mandell assembles various glass pieces, semiprecious stones, minerals, and pottery fragments, matching the desired colors of his design. Each piece is shaped on a wet saw, secured in place by adhesive cement and grouted. Mandell uses his grout lines to accentuate and define the imagery.

He began exploring the possibilities of mosaic while earning his M.F.A. in sculpture from the University of Pennsylvania. There he met an Egyptian painter/mosaicist, Selim El-Sherif, who introduced him to the art form. In the United States, mosaic is often thought of as a medium for decorating furniture and other



*Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss" on the form of a dog, Jonathan Mandell, 55" x 40" x 18", 2002. This mosaic was created for the Art Unleashed competition to benefit the Main Line Center for the Arts in Haverford, Pennsylvania. It is one of 50 dogs positioned around the Main Line area from April 15 through August 31, 2002. Mandell's design was a translation of Klimt's "The Kiss" into mosaic from a two-dimensional flat to a three-dimensional dog form. Mandell used ceramic tile, glass gems, and various polished stones, including amethyst, rose quartz, white quartz, carnelian, jade, tiger eye, peridot, and citrine. This mosaic is designed for exterior use. Detail.*

functional objects. On his 1988 sabbatical to Egypt and Italy, Mandell learned otherwise. He realized that mosaic was as painterly as it was sculptural. And upon his return, he dedicated himself to creating mosaic in its purest form. He established his studio, Jonathan Mandell Designs, in Narberth, Pennsylvania.

In the early part of his career Mandell used mosaic as a decorative element in hand crafted furniture pieces, only later expressing himself in personal, pictorial, wall-mounted pieces. At this point, he side-stepped the gallery scene, focusing his attention on commission-based work by sharing his art with architects and interior designers.

Much of his earlier work was liturgical and inspired by Byzantine mosaic. In 1990, he had a breakthrough with a commission for a Torah cabinet at Gratz College in Philadelphia. This was Mandell's first Judaic commission. It featured a stone finish with mosaiced pocket doors that opened to reveal the Torah scrolls stored within. Another interesting feature is a built-in eternal light made with halogen lamps behind stained glass.

In 1994, he created a mosaic alcove (9' x 10') in the lobby of Adas Israel Synagogue in Washington D.C., featuring an olive tree. The mosaic wrapped around three walls, enveloping the viewer.

Says Mandell, "Because of the tactile quality of mosaic it is very experiential to be able to feel the surface of the work as well view it."

The real turning point for Mandell came in 1996 when he was given the first of several opportunities to exhibit at the museum level. He was invited to exhibit at the Yeshiva University Museum in New York City. A show was being mounted at the time, featuring an archeological gathering of artifacts from the times of the first synagogue (sixth to seventh century). He was asked to make a mosaic tying together the images in the show. With the creation of the mosaic (60" x 60"), titled "Sacred Realm," he began the journey of making two-dimensional, painterly, wall-mounted mosaics, both liturgical and secular.

With these successful commissions under his belt, Mandell returned to non-liturgical work and his love of figurative, abstract concepts in mosaic form. Works like "Restaurant Interior" (2000) and "Art Museum Gallery" (2001) reveal intimate scenes — people and places, bustling, alive. He pursued the art form, testing its boundaries by creating a series of portrait works.

Many of his subsequent commissions depicted sports-related scenes. In 2001, in coordination with the Chamberlain family, Mandell created an 8' x 3' mosaic portrait of Wilt Chamberlain for Overbrook High School — the basketball legend's Philadelphia alma mater. Famous Harlem Renaissance artist, William H. Johnson, influenced the mosaic.

"I take great pleasure in my sports-related mosaics because they lend them-

selves to motion. Mosaic is often thought of as static, and I like to take an opposing view," says Mandell. "I push the limits of what one can do pictorially."

In his 2001 Nisqually series, Mandell takes his interpretation of motion one step further. Using the various convex and concave shards, the mosaic's surface became rather complex topography. No longer working on a flat plane, the imagery and the use of perspective all played into the construction of the surface patterns, adding a bas-relief quality to the mosaic. These shards came from broken art glass, the result of the destructive force of the Tacoma-Seattle earthquake that occurred in 2000. World-renowned glassblowers Dale Chihuly and Sonja Blomdahl shipped boxes of broken shards to Mandell for use in his work. Through his mosaics, their art would be reborn.

"I've seen the restored mosaics at Pompeii, and they gave me the idea to include found or otherwise destroyed objects and reframe them for a new purpose. I hope to do an entire series of work that includes remnants from monumental catastrophes. Mosaic is one of the few art forms that allows such preservation."

Mandell continues, "I was aware of the earthquake and losses incurred. I tried to think of a way to turn something negative into a positive."

Although he'd worked with glass before, it was never the majority material until now. The process began with a white-



*"Nisqually III," Jonathan Mandell, 48" x 48" x 5", 2001. This mosaic was made with glass shards from work that glass artist Dale Chihuly lost in the Nisqually earthquake last year. Additionally, it features a horizon line made from bluelace agate; citrine and chevron amethyst to make flowers; argonite, and jade as a plant; sea urchins and a piece of petrified coral as dandelion tops; and a golden tiger eye sphere, a red tiger eye sphere and a chrysoprase sphere as the centers of the flowers. Part of the proceeds from the sale of this mosaic will go to CERF (Craft Emergency Relief Fund) to help artists whose studios were devastated by the effects of the earthquake.*

washed wooden panel. A schematic layout was drawn in to use as a guide. All the glass shards were laid out and sorted by color and size. The shards were full of tonal nuances, which enhanced Mandell's palette. This palette gently dictated subject matter of the final mosaics: a figurative piece, a floral piece, and an abstracted landscape.

Mandell adhered the shards to the wooden panel bit by bit, and angled them in place, relative to neighbor pieces. As this was an interior application, he used tile mastic to adhere the glass to the board. This mastic created an opaque film on the back of the glass, which controlled the way the light reflected off of it. It also enabled Mandell to angle and set the glass to maintain planar curvatures he wanted on the surface.

To the glass, he added semiprecious stones and minerals to further enhance the imagery. He used latex stucco as grout.

Mandell prefers it to cement because it's more lightweight and flexible.

Two of the pieces, "Nisqually I" and "III," are on display at The Paul Fisher Gallery, West Palm Beach Florida, and "Nisqually II" in Portland, Oregon, at The Alysia Duckler Gallery. Part of the proceeds from the sale of the mosaics will go to the Craft Emergency Relief Fund, to assist artists who suffered losses due to the quake.

Inspired by working with the Chihuly and Blomdahl shards, Mandell hopes to conduct a workshop at Pilchuck, Penland or Haystack in his process of utilizing glass shards to fashion a painterly/sculptural image in mosaic.

The artist continues to work with glass in both interior and exterior applications. He has recently recreated Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss" on the form of a dog for the Art Unleashed competition to benefit the Main Line Center for the Arts in Haverford, Pennsylvania. One of 50 dogs posi-

tioned around the Main Line area, Mandell's translation of "The Kiss" incorporated ceramic tile, glass gems, and various polished stones.

"I had to invent all the points of view in the full sculptural round while trying to maintain the elegance of the Art Nouveau line, distorted onto a dog form," says Mandell. "It's a different kind of challenge because I had to address rapid planar changes."

Mandell is now pursuing three-dimensional mosaic and going back to working with galleries. He is creating two deer and three dogs for a show this December at the Camino Real Gallery in Boca Raton, Florida. As with the Klimt dog, these mosaics will also incorporate a fair amount of glass. Mandell is fabricating the forms now and will be mosaicing them throughout the summer. For more information [www.JonathanMandellMosaics.com](http://www.JonathanMandellMosaics.com).