

History at Home: Roman Mosaics Activity

Mosaics were common in homes and public buildings across the Roman Empire. They were influenced by earlier mosaics from ancient Greece, and often included famous figures from history and mythology, such as Alexander the Great. Many surviving mosaics come from historic sites located in Italy, such as Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Mosaics are beautiful works of art that also tell us about everyday life and items that were used in Ancient Rome. We can look at them to see the clothes that people wore, the food that they ate, and the tools and weapons that they used. They also show us Roman activities like gladiator contests, sports, farming, and hunting. Some mosaics are realistic portraits of people.



2nd Century Roman Mosaic, *Archimedes before his death with the Roman soldier*



Detail of a mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii

Roman mosaics made with small black, white and colored squares that typically measured a quarter inch to an inch in size. These squares, called **tesserae**, were cut from materials such as marble, tile, glass, pottery, stone and even shells. To make a mosaic, a base of fresh **mortar** was first prepared. The tesserae were then stuck into the mortar close together to make the picture. The gaps were then filled with mortar in a process known as **grouting**. Finally, the surface was cleaned and polished.

Now that you have learned about Roman mosaics, you can make a small version of your own. This mosaic will



Detail of a mosaic from *Ancient Rome: The Empire that Shaped the World* exhibition

be made of paper. You can follow the directions for the sunburst pattern mosaic below, or you can make one of your own design.

Vocabulary:

1. **mosaic:** a picture or pattern produced by arranging together small colored pieces of hard material, such as stone, tile, or glass.
2. **tesserae:** small blocks of stone, tile, glass, or other material used to make a mosaic.
3. **mortar:** a mixture of lime with cement, sand, and water, used to bond bricks, stones, tile, glass, etc. to something.
4. **grouting:** the process of applying thin mortar used for filling spaces in a mosaic.

Materials required:

Yellow, orange, blue, and black or white construction paper or any colored paper you have on hand, glue or glue sticks, scissors.



Activity Directions:

1. Use a piece of black or white construction paper as your background.



2. Cut small squares or rectangles of paper out of the other blue, orange, and yellow construction paper. If younger children are participating, you may want to cut slightly larger squares. Older children can cut smaller squares to make it more challenging. The squares do not have to be perfect.



3. Glue the squares onto the paper using a sunburst pattern.



4. Enjoy your mosaic.

