

CVAS RE PROGRAM

learning...celebrating...caring...serving

LEARNING UNIT: 5.4 Icons and Mosaics

Description

Icons and mosaics are works of art as well as religious objects. They invite people into mysteries that may be hard to put into words. In this unit students will learn about 'writing' icons and have an opportunity to create an icon or mosaic that captures the meaning of Christmas.

KLA:

Linked RE Strands

Spiritual Practices

Input for Christmas service

Values and Beliefs (PDH)

Importance of inclusion

Justice and Peace

Anglicare Christmas hampers

Classroom Culture

Gratitude Time each day

Core Biblical & Theological Issues

The visual arts do not feature very much in the Bible.

Since we live in a visual culture, including multimedia and digital imaging, the religious prohibition on images, statues and sculpture strikes us as strange. However, it is not just an ancient phenomenon. Some contemporary faith communities (Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox) are typically rich with icons, mosaics, stained glass windows and other visual artwork, while others (Baptists, Presbyterians and Pentecostals) tend to have fairly austere religious spaces with minimal visual art.

Because the Bible was a hand written document there was limited capacity for graphics to be included. A more important reason is that the ancient Jews—like Muslims today—were suspicious of images that could be used as objects of worship. This is especially so for the later part of the Old Testament period, after the so-called Deuteronomistic Reformation that began around 700 BCE.

In fact, we know that the ancient world had a rich cultural tradition with the visual arts, and that this also was appreciated in ancient Israel.

The golden calves in the northern worship centres in Dan and Bethel were sacred images, and people believed that the invisible God rode (or stood) on the back of the calf. Likewise, the bronze serpent (known as Nehushtan) which was placed on a wall in the Jerusalem temple had religious significance for people coming to the temple for rituals. They believed it was the bronze serpent made by Moses when a plague killed many Israelites, so that people could be cured if they looked at the bronze serpent. We know from 2 Kings 18:4 that incense was burned in rituals that involved the bronze serpent until it was destroyed during an iconoclastic reformation under the influence of the ideas now expressed in the book of Deuteronomy during the time of King Hezekiah.

In this unit students will explore two of the forms in which religious art continued to flourish in Jewish and Christian faith communities:

- **Icons**—religious art, often highly stylised, that communicate selected religious messages to the people who use the icons.
- **Mosaics**—these were artworks created using hundreds of small stones of varying colour. They were very popular in the homes of wealthy people, as well as in synagogues and churches. Sometimes the mosaics reveal that people appreciated ideas which were officially banned, but still included in the art they commissioned for both private and public places.

After an introduction to the concepts of these traditional religious art forms, and some examples from ancient times, you might allocate several weeks for students to work on an icon or mosaic around a theme of their own choosing. The finished works could perhaps be display as part of the end of year service.

Key Content

Introduction to icons and mosaics

- Note how we use terms such as 'font', 'icon', 'mosaic' and 'scroll' in current digital technology. How are these terms used today and how were they used in the past?
- Assist students to identify and explore the differences between these two art forms.
- Study ancient examples of mosaics, including those in public areas at Beth Shean, Jericho, Masada and Sepphoris, as well the religious mosaics in the ancient Jewish synagogues at sites such as Beit Alpha, Dura Europos, Huquq and Tabgha.
- Study ancient and contemporary examples of icons, and some of the conventions around the creation ('writing') of an icon.
- Make a field trip to the Cathedral and identify the use of icons and mosaics, along with other forms of religious art.
- This video explains how icons are used in an Orthodox context:
<https://youtu.be/8gvrkF3XDBk>

Making icons and mosaics today

- There are many online videos that describe the process of creating (writing) an icon, but this one provides an overview of one icon being created from start to finish:
https://youtu.be/_w_jkl6ABDA
- Guide to drawing a Byzantine icon: <https://youtu.be/ededGIt0Muc>
- The Vatican mosaic studio: <https://youtu.be/u6ljISOqbc>
- Guide to making a mosaic: <https://youtu.be/6--o7diaRvw>
- How to make a paper mosaic: <https://youtu.be/3yQ4yQOyPrk>
- Restoring an ancient Mosaic: <https://youtu.be/MXWfH-dR3qI>

Creating an icon or mosaic

Encourage students to identify a theme or a symbol which they would like to reproduce in either an icon or a mosaic. Here are some examples to help get started:

- Cathedral/CVAS badge: Chi Rho
- Clarence River
- Grafton Bridge
- Clocktower
- Christmas
- Cross

Key Resources

Christ Church Cathedral in Grafton has a rich set of religious artwork, although the mosaics are simpler floor tiles rather than highly decorative pieces. The stained glass windows of the Cathedral offer a different set of classic religious artwork as well as being a time capsule for pioneer families in the Grafton area.

The Dean of the Cathedral has several icons, and he is happy to come to one of the class sessions to let students hold the icons and discuss their meaning.

The Dean also has lots of high resolution photographs of historical mosaics from different sites around the Holy Land.

Online videos relevant to this unit include the following:

- Beit Alpha synagogue
https://youtu.be/pthuX_9oWYU
- Restoration of Byzantine mosaics in the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem
https://youtu.be/K_jyg1pOIS4
- Mosaic wall from synagogue at Dura-Europos
<https://youtu.be/ZUW1OM8XwLM>
- Mosaics from Huqoq synagogue
<https://youtu.be/b6bSlvlczIU>
- Tree of life mosaic from Hisham's palace, Jericho
<https://youtu.be/EdfuBc5k4lw>
- Mosaics from Masada
<https://youtu.be/MDwze62V6XU>
- Mosaics from Sepphoris
<https://youtu.be/wwp2rY1CQSw>
- Mosaics at Church of the Multiplication, Tabgha
https://youtu.be/iLkoNJUrI_A

You may want to check if it is possible to use the art room for the last couple of classes this term as students may be working on their pieces over more than one week.