

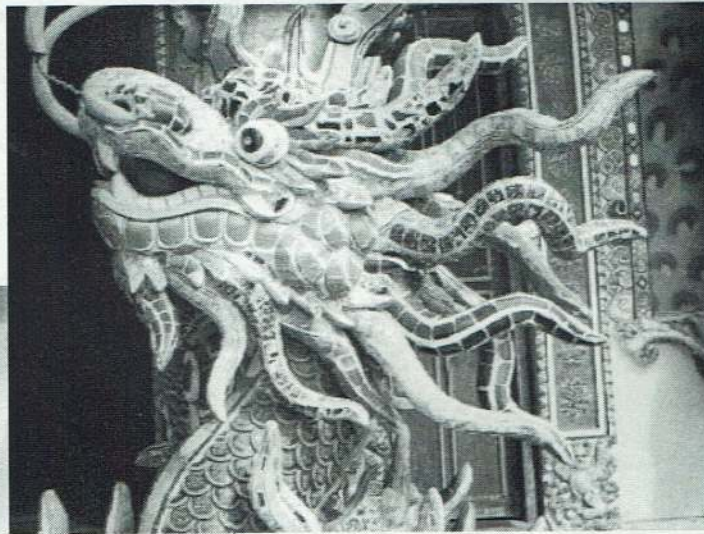
A trip to wonder

Mosaic Art in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam

Early in 2002 I came across an internet site referring to mosaic art in Vietnam and I found the whole thing very intriguing. As I was already planning a trip to Southeast Asia I then decided to check out the mosaic sites along my 'tourist' route. I not only visited the Vietnamese sites but I also got dazzled by mosaic works in Thailand and Laos

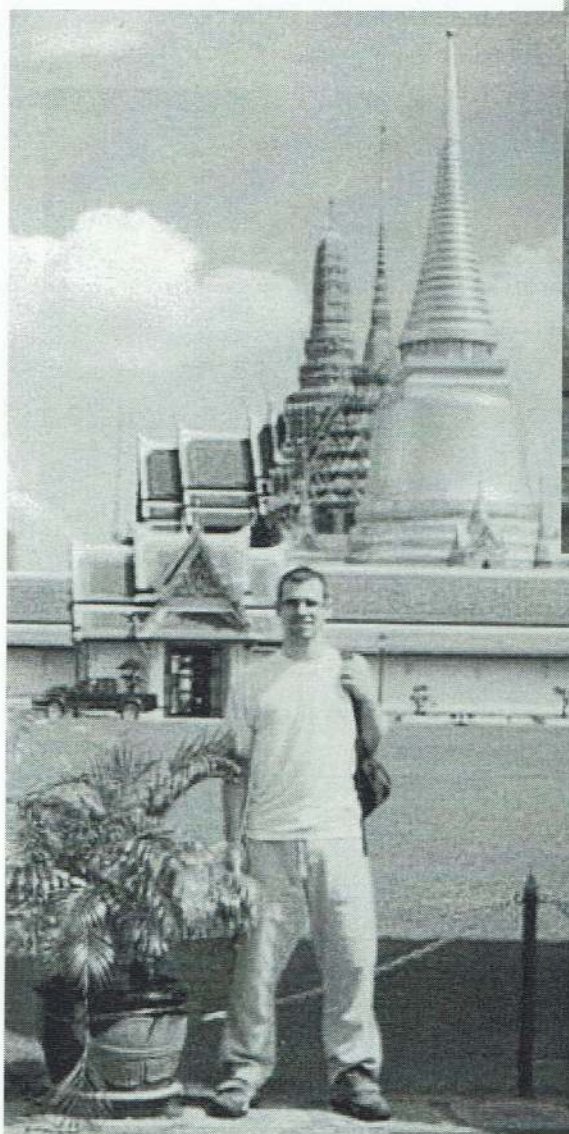
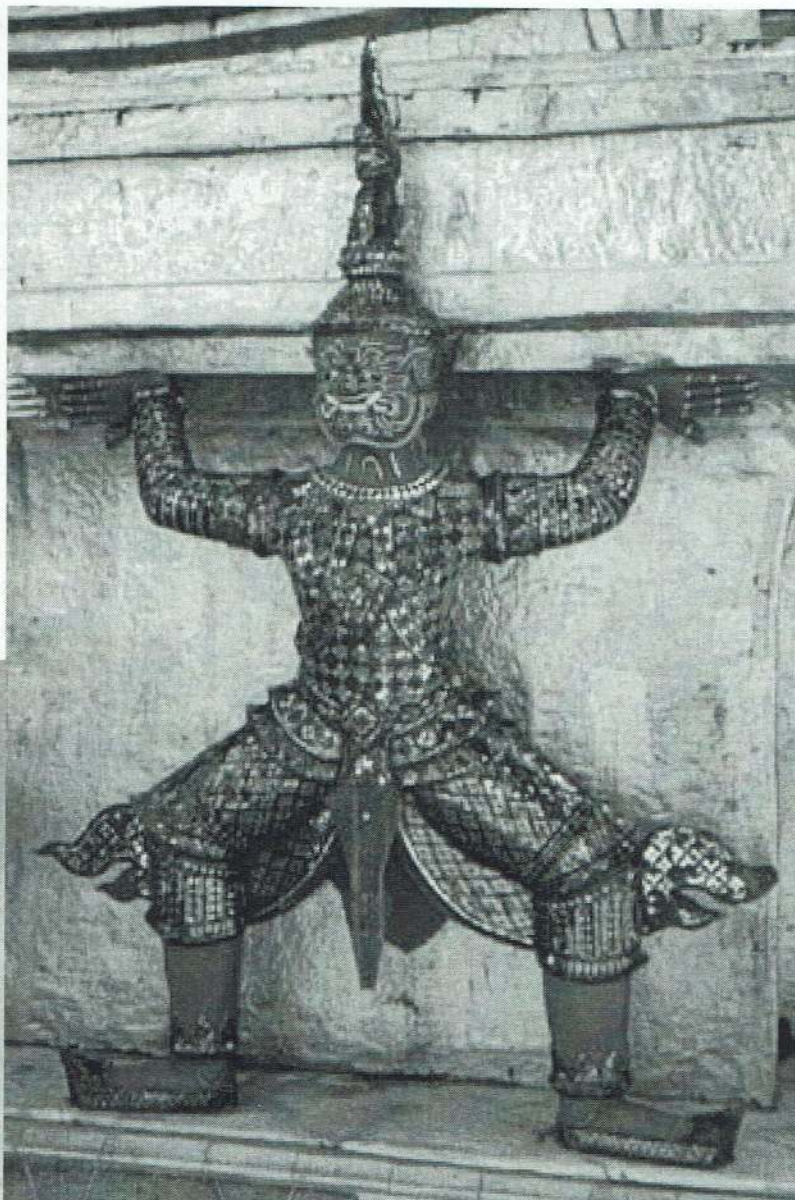
THAILAND

Bangkok was my departure point in the region. I was tipped to visit the 'Grand Palace' complex and the 'Wat Pho' temple. I did not know what to expect and visiting these sites enchanted my first few days. The whole 'Grand Palace' complex is covered in mosaics. It is an



area in the centre of Bangkok with a temple and royal residences. The whole complex has this overwhelming shine from glass, china and ceramics. The main stupa is completely covered in gold mosaic - which looks like 'piastрина'. The temple (Wat Phra Kaew) has a combination of glass mosaics with stucco relief all over. In this case, the bits of glass are used as background for the relief work. The contrast between the relief work and the mosaic background is stunning.

The 'Wat Pho' - a short ride from the 'Grand Palace' - is another great example of Thai architecture. This temple houses a golden Buddha, one of the biggest reclining examples in the world. The temple itself follows similar techniques found in the 'Grand Palace', where the mosaic is used as background for the relief work. Around 'Wat Pho', several structures can be found. These so called 'Chedi' are covered in china and reveal a very peculiar technique.



The bits of crockery are perfectly shaped and are only used for the main lines of the design. In this case, the background did not receive a mosaic coating and the wall itself is the background. Applying tesserae in this way gives the structure a wonderful three-dimensional effect and, to highlight that, the main parts of the design are made by a build-up of tesserae on the top of each other as if in a 'fish scales' effect.

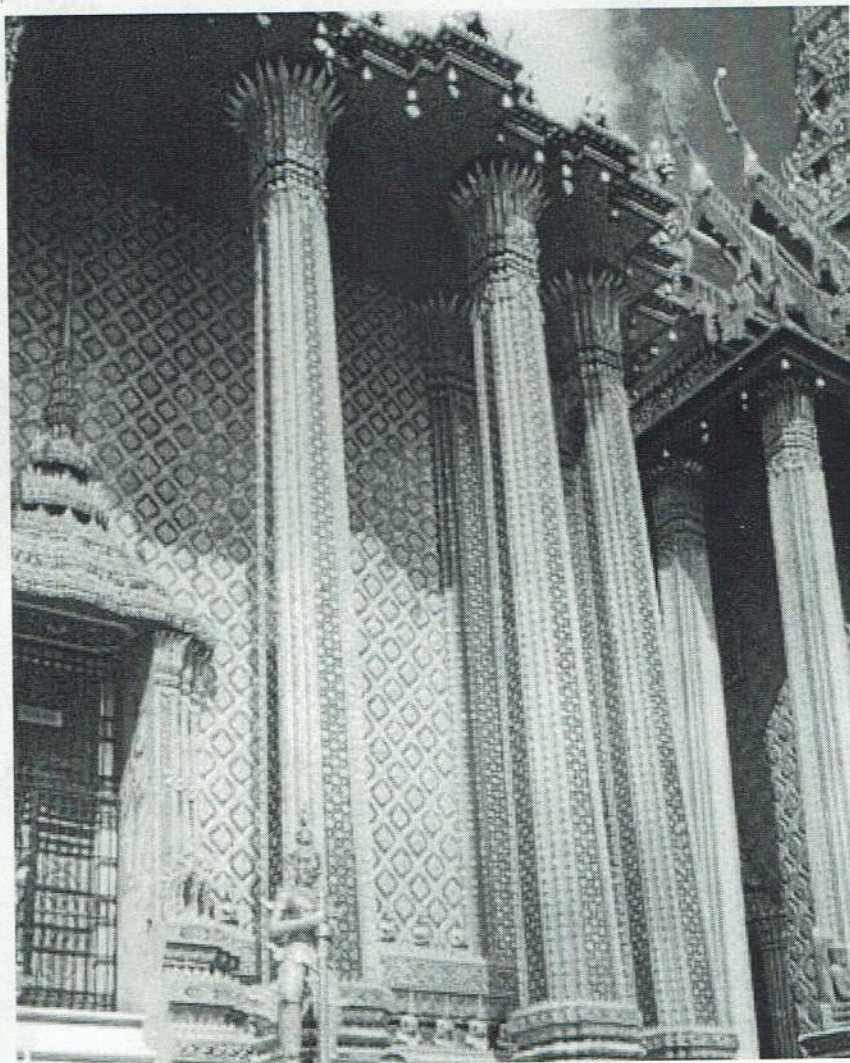
The flowers, fish and dragons found around the site are all made by the build-up of tesserae in this fascinating 3D technique. On some 'chedi' the background are tiled and 3D mosaic designs applied. Samples of mosaics can be found throughout Thailand and another place to be visited is the city of Chiang Mai in the North. There are several temples in the area and it would be difficult to name them all. The most interesting is the 'Wat Phra That' on a hilltop - and some others in the city centre. The whole Thai temple architecture is very complex. Every tiny detail has its own meaning and terminology and is based on Buddhism. As I am not an expert, I focused only in observing mosaic techniques. The use of mosaic in Thailand or some of its elements seems to be closely related to religion as in most European mosaics.

After Thailand I had a brief stop in Cambodia where I could not find any major mosaic work. Maybe the overwhelming beauty of the Angkor temples made me forget mosaics for a wee while.

VIETNAM

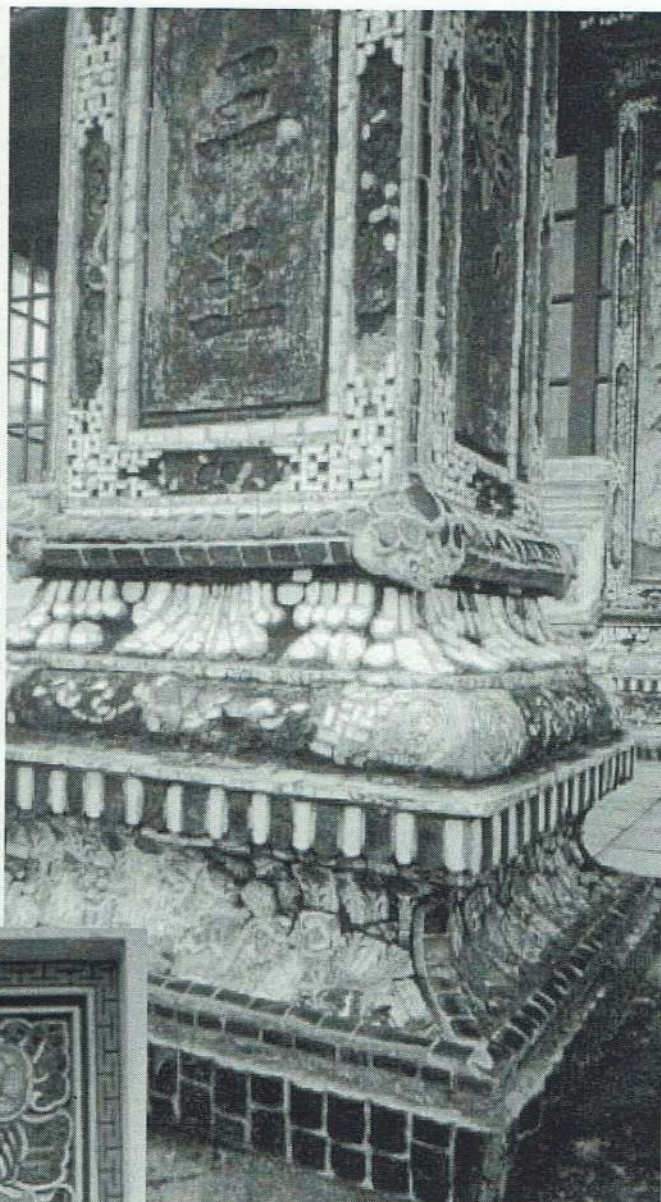
From Cambodia I entered Vietnam and got back in the search for mosaic sites. Like in Thailand, I could find mosaic details in several temples and pagodas from Saigon all the way up north. However, the best mosaic sites are in Dalat (central highlands) and Hue, near the former de-militarised zone.

In Dalat, the place to visit is the Dragon Pagoda. The local population call it 'the pagoda of the lucky Buddha' due to its famous dragon, which is made of bits from over 12,000 beer bottles. It is an spectacular sculpture in the garden. Also, the whole building has been decorated with crockery mosaics. Its beauty lies in the 3D characteristics of the work, slightly different from the Thai technique. In this case, we find full use of mosaic backgrounds and an intricate positioning of tesserae following the sculptural curves of the columns, which are shaped like dragons. The tesserae making the teeth are particularly interesting. Mosaic works can also be seen on the roof of the pagoda where the lotus flower plays a central role. There we see a dozen 3D lotus buds and plenty of fully open ones. The open lotus is particularly interesting for being divided up in several thin petals which are covered in patterned china. The pagoda was built in the 1930's and fully restored in



the 1980's when most of the mosaics were applied. In Hue, former imperial capital, we can find several mosaic sites.

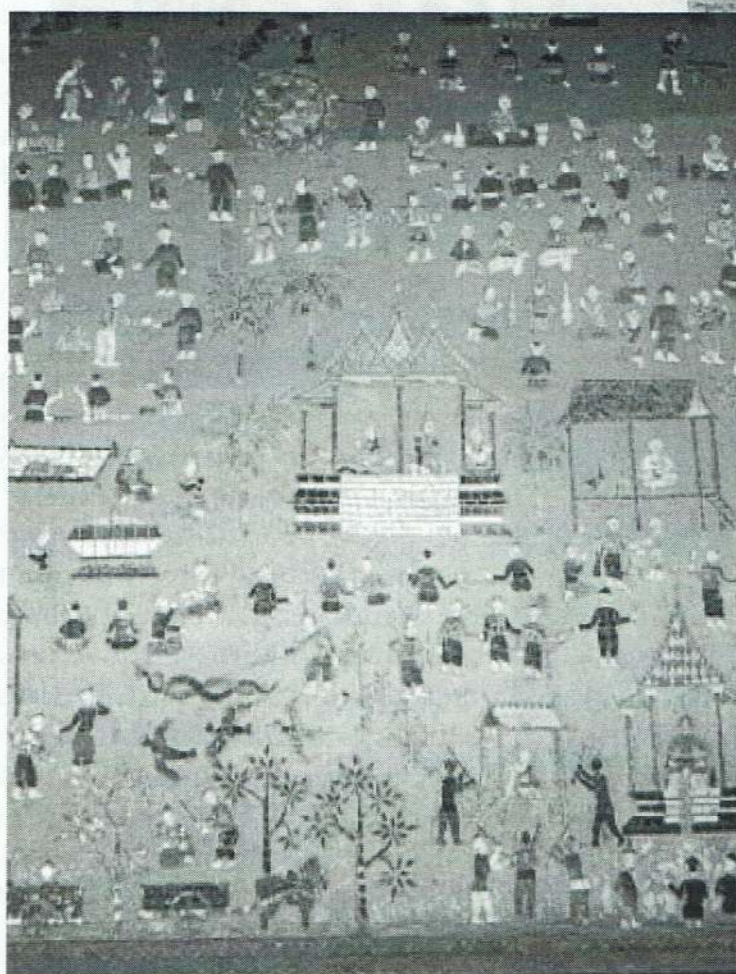
However, the best site is the mausoleum of the emperor Khai Dinh, along the Perfume River. The mausoleum has one of the masterpieces of Vietnamese mosaic art. The main rooms are covered in glass and china mosaics. The shine is magnificent. Once again I noticed the intricate placement of tesserae in the 3D fashion, so characteristic of Vietnamese mosaics. The bits of china or glass followed perfectly the curves of the plaster, becoming the relief themselves. I was stunned by the sight of a little bird on the wall made entirely from hand cut bottles and positioned with perfection as if flying out of the wall. The site was built in the 1920's and recently restored. It is the best preserved mosaic site in Vietnam.



Another site to be visited in Hue is the Imperial City. There we can find mosaic works adorning several buildings. This site is not in a great condition due to several reasons, but mainly the war. It was partially destroyed and has yet to be fully restored. In some parts the mosaic work has been renewed.

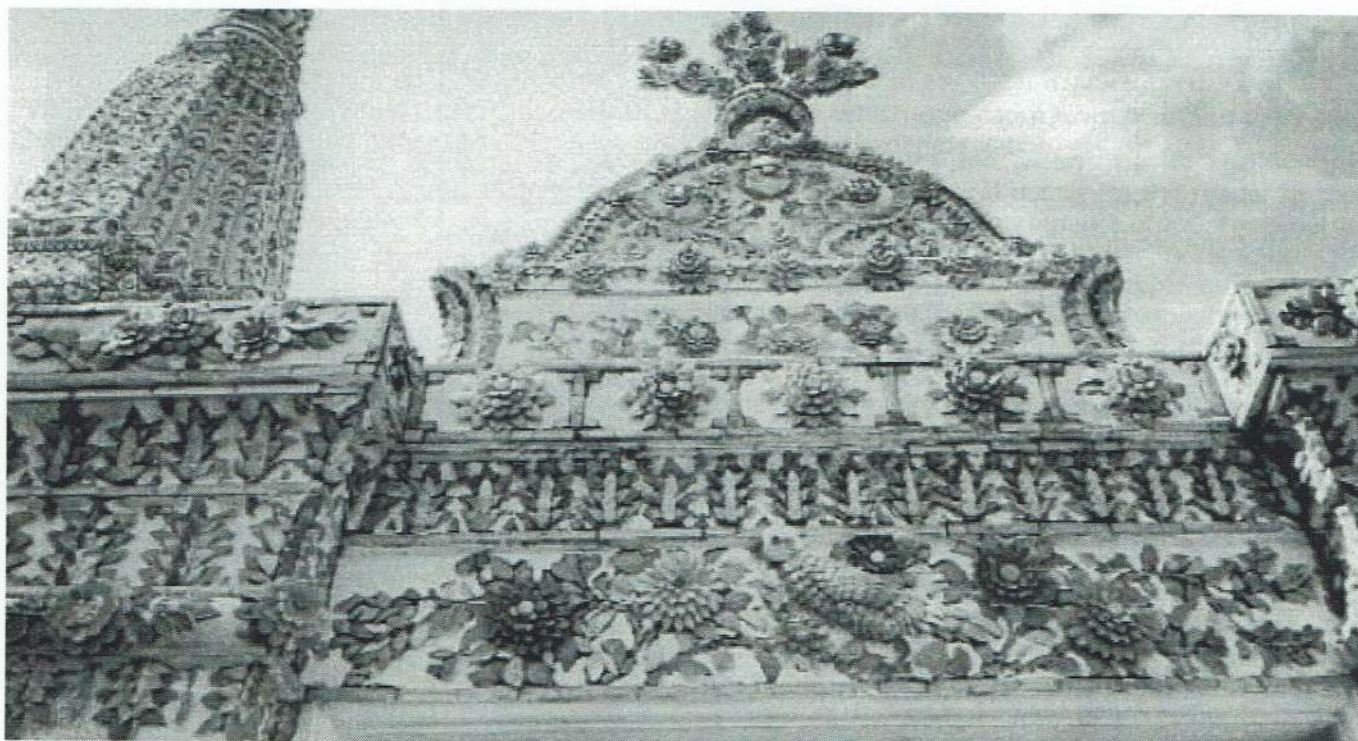
However, the most interesting building for mosaics is falling apart. This building has relief mosaics on the internal and external walls and the best part are the figurative sculptures on the roof top.

My next stop from Hue was Hanoi, the capital. This city is one of the most beautiful French colonial cities in the region and the Fine Art Museum houses an incredible lacquer-painting collection. Plenty of eggshell mosaics can be seen incorporated into those paintings. Contemporary mosaic works can also be seen in places around Hanoi. In the area surrounding the Ho Chi Minh Museum I could spot two mosaics depicting "communist" scenes. However, as the whole area is heavily guarded, I could not get closer to better appreciate them.



LAOS

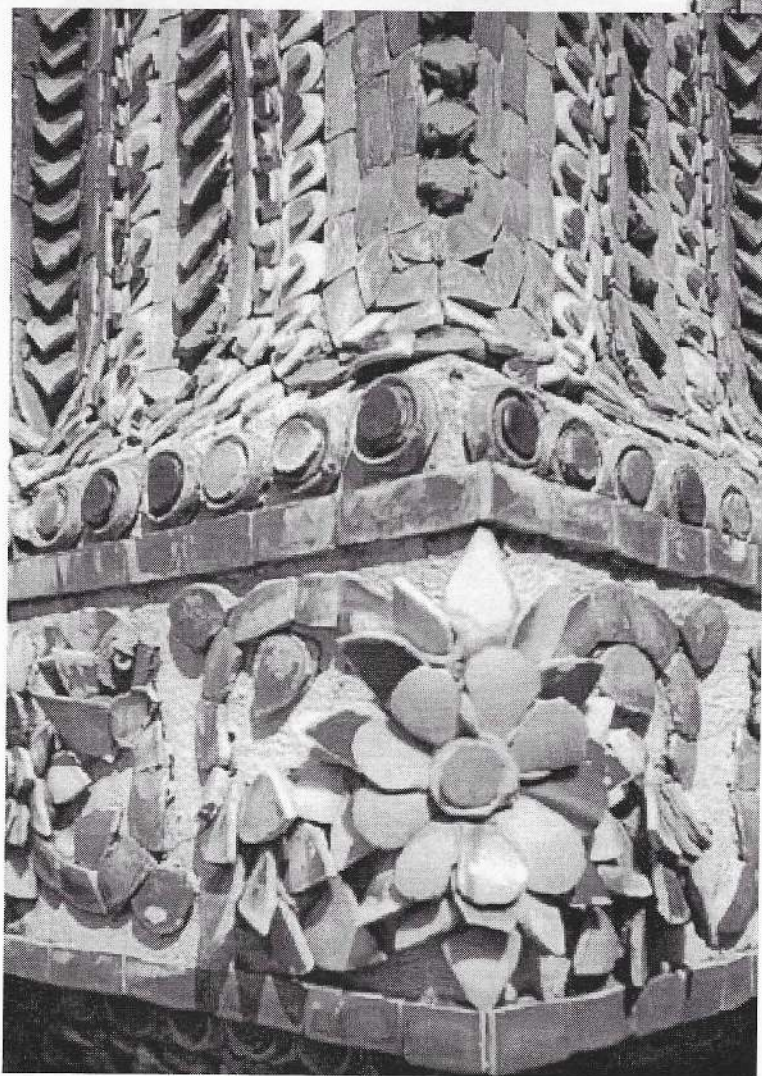
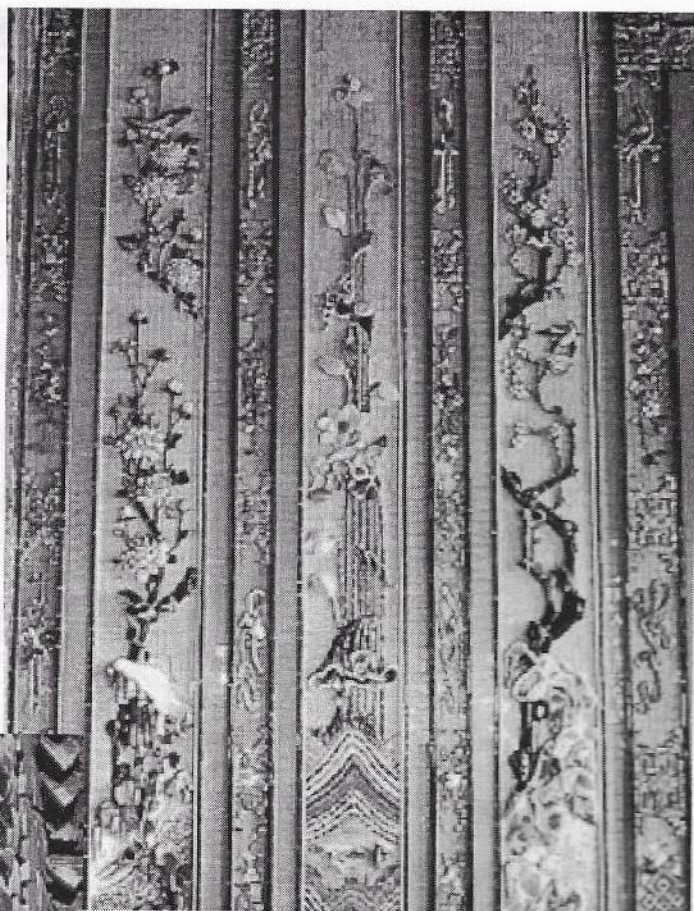
From Vietnam I flew to Laos. In the capital, Vientiane, I could find mosaics adorning several temples and the most interesting one was 'Wat In Paeng' temple with its fantastic mosaics facade. The mosaic facade is entirely green - made from glass as a background to an intricate wood relief. I also visited the Buddha Park just outside Vientiane. The park is along the Mekong river and it was built in the 1950's. The area is covered in concrete sculptures depicting scenes related to Buddhism. I could spot the odd bit of tesserae here and there on a few sculptures.



In Laos, the best mosaics are in Luang Prabang, a charming French colonial city. There are two main sites. The first one is the National Museum, former Royal Palace. In this site, the Throne Hall has all the walls covered in mosaics and I was amazed when I entered the room. The whole mosaic has a very peculiar technique. The background was the wall itself and the main images were mosaics. In the Lao mosaics, the background is red plaster and the main designs are made from Japanese glass, which is very thin and highly reflective. The mosaic depicts scenes of Lao festivals and the sheer number of people and animals depicted on the wall was unbelievable. The palace was built in 1909 and the mosaics were applied during the refurbishment in the 1960's.



The other site in Luang Prabang is the 'Wat Xieng Thong' temple, with its 'Tree of Life' mosaic. The work follows the same characteristics of the one in the Museum differing only by the use of some sculptures such as an elephant head and lotus flowers. In the temple, the mosaic work adorns the outside walls while the one in the museum is indoors. By seeing both sites I could view the same techniques and ideas under natural and artificial lights.



When I set off in this journey I had no idea I would find such a diversity of sites and techniques. South East Asia as a whole is an amazing place and I bet there are plenty of mosaics out there to be seen. For me, the East will never cease to wonder.

Marcelo de Melo