

## Think Smalti: Little Blocks Become Colorful Compositions

| By Saxon Henry |



Colorful mosaics provide the signature décor at Domus Orsoni, where students stay when attending workshops at the Orsoni mosaic foundry.

A weeklong study of the Venetian sky reveals a palette of moody hues — from spirited azure and somber indigo to winsome lavender and rose. Nestled beneath this clamor of color, the library at the Orsoni mosaic foundry is filled with as many tonal variations as nature can foist upon its walled façade. Shelves of jewel-toned glass glow in the muted light — cerulean, daffodil, lime and crimson, filed by personality (fiery reds stacked beside juicy oranges and ferny greens) and by number (nearly 3,000 separate itemized hues in all).

The alchemy that brings all this color into being has been carried forward by four generations of the Orsoni family. Although much of the transformative process from molten color to brittle media has remained a mystery to the novice for ages, the family has decided to share the art of mosaics with anyone who cares to sign up for a class.

Glass smalti has been created in the foundry, which rests within the Cannaregio district of Venice, since 1888 when Angelo Orsoni fired his first incandescent furnace. While

painters work with tubes of color and paintbrushes or palette knives, the mosaicist makes smalti by melting and mixing raw materials with his or her secret “recipe” of color, which is offered to the fire to be forever frozen in hardened radiance. As revered as their smalti, Orsoni’s luminous gold mosaics are composed of an extremely thin sheet of 24-karat white or yellow gold that is sandwiched between two layers of glass. Once fired, the gold leaf effervesces within its glass shell — a luxurious spark that’s to a mosaic composition what jewelry is to a gorgeous gown.

It’s Angelo’s great-grandson, Lucio Orsoni, who has decided to demystify mosaic techniques dating back to the Byzantines, many of which have changed surprisingly little in the intervening centuries. During “Living the Venice Workshop: History, Theory and Application of Mosaic Art,” attendees are taught to handle the traditional hammer and hardie to cut and shape tiny glinting squares of glass, called tessera, that they extract from larger sheets shelved in the library. They then learn to meld these squares into beautiful compositions, just as some of the world’s most celebrated mosaic artists have done through the ages.



Mosaics in the Trocadéro and the Basilica of the Sacré Coeur, both in Paris, were created with Orsoni materials, as were those in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. Antoni Gaudi chose Orsoni smalti for the spires of his Sagrada Familia in Barcelona.

Devotees of Orsoni glass say it is special because it has a vivid opacity. In her book, *Mosaic Art and Style*, JoAnn Locktov explains that while most glass reflects light, Orsoni's glass swallows it, which gives it greater character. "If you light a match and hold it up to a mosaic created with Orsoni smalti, the reflected flame becomes smaller," she says. Visitors to the foundry don't have to go far to see evidence of this, as an adjacent bed and breakfast, Domus Orsoni, is awash in chic mosaics made from Orsoni glass. The contemporary interiors are all the more surprising given the villa's sun-baked stucco exterior and aged travertine patios shaded by canopies of magnolia.

Students stay in the villa while attending the three-, five- and ten-day courses that take place at the foundry, where glinting mosaics hover above their heads and the tessera are sprinkled like bright confetti into octagonal bowls during class time. Add to the mix strolls through the statuesque wrought-iron gates of the compound into the living mosaic of Venice. At every turn, the sky is splashed on water, and even an overcast day brings an array of colors. Plump domes finger into milky morning light, tiled parapets gleam at midday, and fretted arches blush as twilight dares to take them—each scene presenting hues that Orsoni will likely have a glass to rival.

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