

A Patchwork of Mosaics



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My interest in the use of the Lowenfeld Mosaic Test in the study of cultural differences was first aroused by Dr. Rhoda Metraux when she came to the Institute of Child Psychology (founded by and where I trained under Dr Margaret Lowenfeld) to tell us of her anthropological work in the latmul village in the East Sepik District of Papua New Guinea. She showed us a collection of Mosaics made by the villagers. They were entirely different from anything I had ever seen, which was mainly Western European Mosaics. The collection as a whole bore no relation to the range of adult Mosaics which I had learnt to call 'normal'.

Briefly, one of the most striking features of the collection is the absence of MOVEMENT: that is, either the representation of transport objects (especially since the latmul are a river people) or the representation of objects in movement; or movement within an abstract design, most clearly demonstrated in what Lowenfeld calls the whirling pattern. (Slides: Projector 1, 1-9: Mosaics demonstrating types of Movement)

The fact is: Every single one of the latmul Mosaics had Movement, a common Movement - it was the key feature noted by Metraux. Although every Mosaic in the collection was a unique design, this common feature is in the PROCESS by which the Mosaic was made, the movement by which the Mosaic was woven, one might say. The evidence was there in front of me - that is, the order of placement of the Mosaic tiles was numbered, but I had not noticed. (Slides: Projector 1, 10-13: latmul Mosaics demonstrating Movement in the Mosaic Process)

The second feature which struck me at the time, was the absence of abstract patterns in the way West Europeans conceive of such designs. A design called "Belem" is the nearest one could classify under such a heading, but these are designs for woven wall material and very different in conception as well as execution to the European abstract pattern.

The weaving process by which the latmul Mosaics were made, coupled with the Belem designs make evident another feature of this collection of Mosaics - that is, the frequent occurrence of a central column round which this weaving is done.

The fourth remarkable feature to note is not only the preponderance of representational designs but the high proportion of a particular kind of representation. Dr. Metraux tells us that all latmul art is metaphoric and stylised, so that it would not be surprising to see a blurring of distinctions between the naturalistic representation and a translation of traditional, metaphoric or supernatural designs into their mosaic making. This kind of conceptual design, which in Western terms is described by Lowenfeld as "those designs in which use has been made of standard symbols of myths and fairy tale" form only an extremely small proportion of any Western collection; here it forms a significant proportion of the latmul collection.

Already one can see emerging a sense of the subtlety of the LMT as an instrument for cultural study. The chance for me to take this up, however, did not emerge until 1985, when a combination of events gave me the opportunity to look at the photographic reproduction of a number of collections from Africa, and Malaysia, and in particular, one collection from a sample of Chinese males from Malaya (now part of Malaysia), and a mixed sample, mainly Islamic, from Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania). (Woodcock, 1986)

I should just like to mention the two features which immediately strike one's eye when one looks at the two collections laid side by side. The Tanganyikan collection of 138 Mosaics consists entirely (with but one exception) of ABSTRACT designs (i.e. only one representational design out of 138) and of the 137 abstract designs, 56 contained a completed hexagon in the design. By contrast, in the Malayan Chinese collection, 99 out of a total of 109 are REPRESENTATIONAL designs.

(Slide examples comparing and contrasting the distinct structure of each group. Slides: Simultaneous presentation on Projector I, 14-16: Malayan Chinese Mosaic structure. Projector 11, 1-3: Tanganyikan Mosaic structure)

The second contrasting feature of the collection is in the spatial aspect of the Mosaic designs. The Mosaics from Tanganyika look fluid in their use of colour and seem to treat the tray space as integral and an equal partner with the Mosaic pieces in the concept of the design. The Malayan Chinese Mosaics, however, not only exhibit a strong structure but it seems that the tray space serves only as a background for the display of the Mosaic design.

(Slides, Simultaneous presentation on Projector 1, 17-24; Malayan Chinese examples; Projector H, 4-11; Tanganyikan examples).

The evening that I laid these two collections out side by side on my carpet saw my curiosity reach a high point. What could all this mean? How could I explore these differences further? Since the subject of culture is such a pervasive and protean phenomenon, how does one even begin to formulate anything called a research proposal?

Perhaps now is the right moment to briefly describe the Lowenfeld Mosaic Test. The LMT consists of a box of 456 coloured tiles and a tray. The Mosaics are arranged in rows standing on their edges in the box, grouped by shape and displaying all the colours in each shape. There are 5 shapes, all bearing a mathematical relation to each other. The basic shape is a square from which the isosceles, equilateral and scalene triangles are derived; the sides of the diamond are the same length as the square (i.e. 301mm). Each shape is available in red, blue, yellow, black, green and white, arranged in that order. This box is presented to the subject along with a tray (fitted with plain white paper) the dimensions of which were chosen so that complete edged patterns can be made. In the field research workers should, according to Lowenfeld, use a half set. (which is unfortunately not now available).

The first important point about the LMT as a research instrument for cultural study is the non-verbal nature of the central response; it demands the minimum of skill to manipulate and no specialist knowledge to make a response.

It is a tool which overcomes the main problem of cultural studies - that of the language of the response to the research enquiry'. The second point to emphasise concerning the LMT as a projective tool is the concept of the Total Response. This concept embraces the whole process of the making of the Mosaic by the subject as well as the design s/he completes: the design product. This latter forms the core of the Response and can be analysed entirely through looking at a collection of Responses, laid out side by side.

For the first 6 months of 1986, I collected 31 Mosaics from Chinese children, aged between 8-12 years, living in Greater London, who attend Chinese language classes for about an hour and a half at the weekend in London, but who otherwise have been wholly educated in England.

To set these Mosaics in a wider context, I should like to show you samples of these Mosaics from UK Chinese children, firstly in comparison to the Mosaics from the Malayan Chinese children of a comparable age range, then in contrast to comparable Mosaics made by English children collected by myself and some of my pupils.

As you view the slides, I would like you to note both the Structure and Design type of the Mosaics.

Slide examples: 16 from the UK collections, 8 from the Malayan Chinese. Slides: Simultaneous presentation on Projector I, repeat 17-24: Malayan Chinese Mosaics; Projector II, 12-19: UK Chinese Mosaics.

8 from the English - Slides: Simultaneous presentation on Projector I, 25-32: UK English Mosaics; Projector II: Repeat 12-19: UK Chinese Mosaics.

You are sure to have noticed the similarity in STRUCTURE - i.e. in the formal and colour balance where appropriate, in the 3 groups of Mosaics, and the contrast in design type between the 2 Chinese collections on the one hand and the English collection on the other - i.e. representational designs vs abstract patterns. Whilst the UK Chinese and the Malayan Chinese have similar proportions - i.e. 90% & 85% Representationals to 10% & 15% Abstracts respectively; the English Mosaics show totally reversed figures - i.e. 15% Representationals to 85% Abstracts. There are no Slab Patterns in these three collections (Slab patterns, as defined by Lowenfeld, are patterns "in which a number of mosaic pieces are placed either closely or loosely in juxtaposition to each other without the creation of an overall symmetrical shape): the significance of this will be clear later.

I should now like to widen the comparison further by quoting from Stewart and Leland's specific study (American versus English Mosaics. IN J. Projective Techniques, 16, 246-246. 1952) of cultural differences in the mosaics of a group of American high school children compared to the mosaics from a similarly aged group of English children. They note three significant differences.

“Our (i.e. American) children make a strikingly smaller proportion of abstract symmetrical, balanced, conventional patterns and when our children do make this type of pattern, it is much more apt to show a colour or piece variant which breaks its symmetrical perfection. From the earliest age our children make a much higher percentage of representational patterns. The third striking difference is that our children make a large percentage of patterns showing no coherent order (i.e. Slabs). this is the type which has been considered in England to medicate mental or emotional disturbance. The significance with our children seems to be entirely different. Many of our most stable children make this pattern.”

In this summary, there seems to be an underlying suggestion of staidness in the conventionality of the ‘symmetrical and balanced patterns’ in contrast to the more unconventional and freer style shown in the slab patterns made by many of their ‘most stable children’. Has this, I wonder, anything to do with the different cultural values between the two countries? A nation which evolved through centuries of a unique and long history will have founded institutions which value tradition (as in China or in Britain). A nation built upon a consequence of non— conformity and therefore a spirit of the breaking of convention and a sense of adventure, culminating in the proclamation of independence through revolution cannot but show a less deferential attitude to tradition and a more pioneering approach to life. (as in the United States of America).

Moreover, this summary leaves out one other striking contrast between these two collections, and that is, the large number of American children who make so called “Immature Patterns”. This proportion stays consistently at 17% throughout the 8-18 age range. Immature patterns are designs usually made by European children under 6 years of age and practically disappears after age 7. Clearly, if 17% of American children make these designs throughout the age range into adulthood, it must have quite a different significance.

(For further explanation and illustrations SEE Lowenfeld (1954) C115: The use of the LMT in the study of children).

I would now like to use a Table to compare the Malayan Chinese collection with the American study. (Slide: Projector I, 33: comparing English, American and Malayan Chinese Mosaics. To maintain a relative parity of grouping, I am excluding the UK Chinese collection in this comparison.)

Table showing the percentage distribution of Mosaics into different categories.

Age Group	8-11	8-11	10-12	13-18	13-18	13-18
Cultural Group	ENG	AM	M.C.	ENG	AM	M.C
Total number	147	74	29	250	250	37

Representational %	9	71.6	79.3	7	17.2	89.2
Abstract %	80.7	5.4	20.7	90	50.4	10.8
Incoherent/Slab %	10.3	5.4	0	2.8	12.5	0
Immature Patterns %	0	17.6	0	0	17	0

It is at once noticeable that if one puts the categories in a sliding scale of popularity, the American collection stands in the middle with regard to the type of design - i.e. representational or non-representational, but on its own in the categories of Slab patterns or Immature designs. (Immature designs include the following: Single patterns Including fundamental or prefundamental designs or scattered pieces (Slides: Projector I: 34 & 35 showing these: detailed description are given in Lowenfeld Mosaic Test, 1954, p.119.

In these statistics you will see the strong contrast between the English and Chinese groups in respect of type of design but you will also recall how similar in structure these same Mosaics are. If you can cast your mind back a little thither, there is a certain quality in the Tanganyikan collection which might very well put a number of the Tanganyikan mosaics in the Slab or Immature category. If we take a cross-cultural view, however, these might easily be placed with the American mosaics of a similar looking design and may very well have a normative meaning.

However, I would now like to return to the Malayan Chinese Mosaics: this collection contains an entirely new category which I have called "applied abstract patterns". For example (Slide: Projector I, 36) design for wall tiles (MC432) or (Slide: Projector I, 37) design for real Indian cloth (MC318) or (Slide: Projector I, 38) design for a floor in a sitting room (MC291) or (Slide Projector I, 39) simple design for cloth for making Yankee shirts (MC294). It makes such designs much more concrete and much less abstract, in Western terms. It also brings to mind the Belem designs made by the latmuls mentioned at the begining of this Paper.

So far as I know, such designs have not been described in connection with the American and English children's mosaics and yet, if one were to remove these mosaics from the Abstract category and put them in a separate category, that of A

Applied Abstract Design, then this category, within the 13-18 age range forms 8% of the total and is a larger percentage than the percentage of representational mosaics made by English children in the same age range.

What can all this signify? Whilst the numbers are not exactly comparable and whereas boys and girls in the Stewart & Leland study were not classified separately, and the Malayan collection only has boys - nonetheless these figures and the Mosaics themselves indicate sufficient differences to warrant the asking of that question seriously. At the very least it justifies further investigation.

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