

NEWS

ARTS

COLUMNS

[Blast From The Past](#)
[City Streets](#)
[Dangerously Normal](#)
[Dog Lady](#)
[Flash Fiction](#)
[Holistically Speaking](#)
[Kids Health with Dr. Jack](#)
[Police Beat](#)
[South End Character](#)
[South End Football](#)
[Youth Voices](#)

OPINION

[Editorial](#)
[Letters](#)

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[Place an Ad](#)

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[Trash Collection](#)
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[Public Library](#)
[Bay Windows](#)

Arts

South End artist brings antiquity to youth

by Michele D. Maniscalco
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Christos Hamawi teaches mosaics to schoolchildren

Like many visual artists, South End resident Christos Hamawi appreciates both the income opportunity and the exposure afforded by commissions for public works of art, but Hamawi has turned his current commission, a multi-panel, outdoor mosaic installation for the Josiah Quincy elementary school (JQS) into another sort of opportunity. Rather than working in his own studio, Hamawi is creating the mosaic panels, which represent the four seasons, in a studio-workshop at the school, giving fourth and fifth graders the chance to learn the millennia-old technique. "It's a great way to give back to the community. I can create art and teach at the same time. In the future, when they go and see a mosaic mural, they will understand how it was done," Hamawi said. He continued, "When they commissioned me to do the artwork, the option was to do it in my studio, but I wanted to teach as well, so I suggested I do it on site and involve the students in the whole process."

Hamawi is an established painter whose public works include an indoor mural at the Westin Hotel at Copley Place, outdoor acrylic-on-steel paintings at the Grew School in Hyde Park, and the Urban Wilds painted box in Copley Square. Much of his work celebrates nature in urban areas such as wildflowers growing along busy streets that are often overlooked as we walk past them every day. Hamawi's style, while primarily realistic, magnifies and brings forth the beauty of these ubiquitous flowers and grasses. "I love capturing those hidden worlds that are in the city, right in front of us," Hamawi explained.

Hamawi had to consider carefully his choice of tile for durability as well as beauty. "For this project, since it's going to be installed outdoors, everything is either glass or porcelain so it's non-porous. About 90 percent of the tile being used is porcelain tile from France that is used often in fountains in parks, in swimming pools and for the adornment of buildings like churches that have a lot of ornate design work. A lot of mosaic workers use this kind of tile because it is durable, easy to cut and can withstand all kinds of weather," he explained.

Hamawi draws a balance between purchasing art materials according to their specific qualities and specifications and keeping his commitment to recycling by reusing everyday objects as tools. In a recent, Friday afternoon workshop,, he told fifth graders Emily Wu and Jonathan Arias, "We are using all kinds of official mosaic tools, but this is just a plastic knife, and I clean them off and reuse them," he explained as he used the knife to apply cement to a tile. Hamawi generously applied cement and pushed the tile into place on the backboard. "This is where it comes in handy. You can use a popsicle stick, too." Hamawi showed how to use a toothbrush and kitchen sponge to remove excess wet cement from the tiles and demonstrated how to use a screwdriver to clean cement from the edges of tiles and to remove tiles after the cement has set. Hamawi encourages the students to make their own mosaics using "found objects" such as shells, beach glass and pebbles with cardboard backing and Elmer's glue.

Hamawi's teaching mentor at JQS is visual arts teacher Sally Wattles, a longtime veteran of the Boston Public Schools but a new addition to the JQS faculty. Hamawi said, "She's fantastic. She's my partner. She trained me how to teach the kids." Wattles in turn is very enthusiastic about Hamawi's workshop. "It's great for the kids to see a real artist's hands-on process and to try it. In general, it supports the idea of how important it is to have arts in the school. The kids are really excited about it. They should be doing things like this: touching things, making things." Wattles also noted the interdisciplinary aspect of teaching mosaics: "I think it's great for them to learn about an art form that is so old. It's a part of history and social studies." Hamawi touched on the interdisciplinary connection in the workshop. "There's a lot of geometry in mosaics. You start to recognize that you need certain shapes: triangles, rectangles, trapezoids. Have you guys studied that at all? You will remember that when you study geometry," he said.

Hamawi has involved students in every grade and as many students as possible in the mosaics project by having them participate in different aspects of its creation. He started with a 20 minute overview in the art of mosaics for all students, and asked four different classes to draw their favorite aspects of a particular season to contribute to the design. "For winter, they drew trees and snowflakes, for spring they drew a lot of flowers, which were the inspiration for my mosaic design." He expects that by the end of the six-month project, about 100 fourth and fifth graders will have taken part in the one-hour hands-on workshop. Hamawi finds that the ideal number of students per session is two, although sometimes he has three or four per session. Together with Ms.

Wattles, the art teacher, he is planning to have the students use pre-cut tiles to make coasters that they can take home. Upon the mural project's completion around June 20, there will be an opening ceremony with student musical performances and an exhibition of the drawings that inspired the mosaic designs. Hamawi hopes to return to JQS next school year to teach students to make their own tiles from clay, fire them in the school's kiln and create individual mosaics to be combined in a larger installation.

Hamawi emphasized the values imparted by participating in the painstaking art of mosaics. "It's important to give this sort of lesson about craftsmanship, perseverance and dedication. When someone sees a finished mosaic and wonders, 'Wow, that looks like it took a lot of time'," Hamawi said with a chuckle, "It does. There are no shortcuts to get that handmade look that I love, that ancient quality."



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