

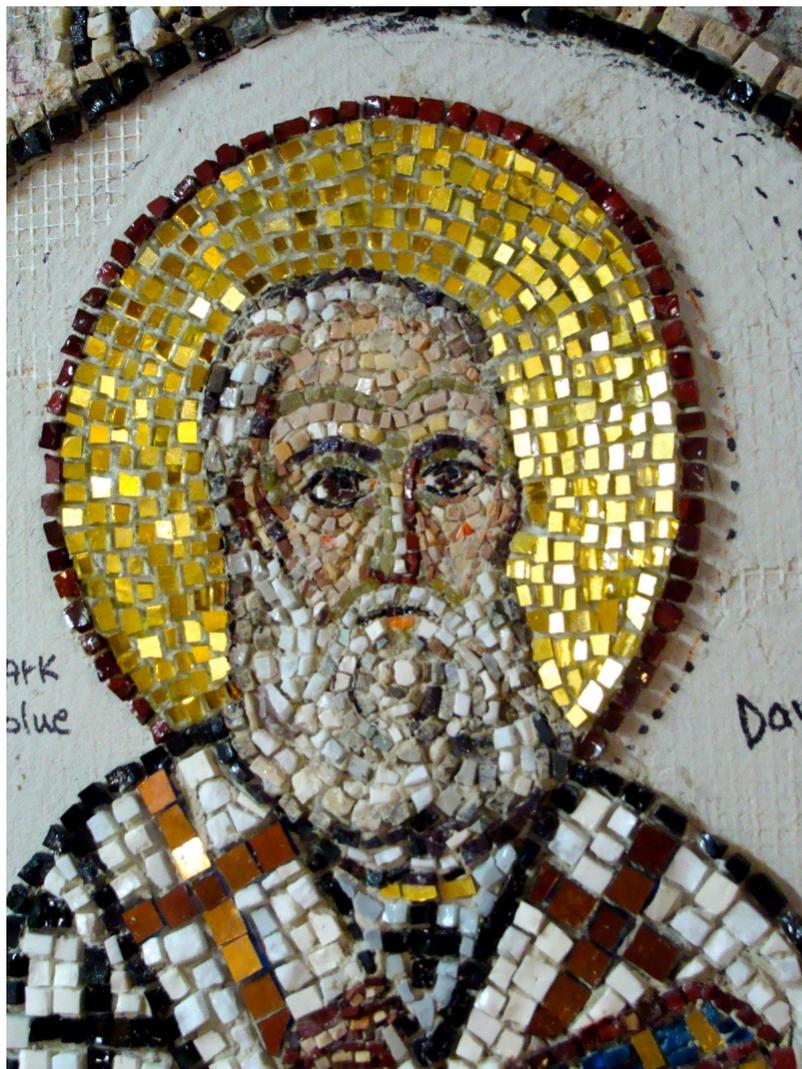
## Robert Amos: Bringing high art to a house of worship

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Robert Amos / Times Colonist

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A closeup of the intricate detail work on the mosaic.  
Photograph By ROBERT AMOS

Marie Allison was in the basement of a low building on a side street in Fairfield, making little chinking noises as she dropped the heavy martella hammer onto pieces of coloured glass. She was making tesserae, little cubes with which to fill in the design that lay on the table beside her, drawn upon a sheet of rubbery mesh.

All around were full-scale drawings — cartoons — of saints, and sacred texts spelled out in handsome lettering. This workshop is beneath Saint Sophia, the only Russian Orthodox church in Victoria, and is the centre of a project that has occupied a dozen members of the congregation for the past 14 years.

They are ornamenting their little church with mosaics in the Byzantine style and, though deeply traditional, this is unique in Canada.

The day before, I had attended the Sunday service. A sung eucharist went on for almost two hours amid clouds of incense and much coming and going by the gorgeously robed celebrants, perhaps the most elaborate ritual of the Christian spectrum.

All around, icons on shelves were honoured with votive candles burning gently. Mosaics twinkled around the window apertures and shone on the walls of the apse beyond. Overhead, a mosaic dome almost four metres across spanned the nave.

As elaborate as it is, this church is still a work in progress.

The idea of mosaic decor was initiated by Father John Adams, himself an icon painter. He was brought into the Orthodox faith by a beloved Victorian, Nikita Prince Galitzine, who for years took locals to church in Vancouver, and then in 2000 donated this building in Fairfield to the fledgling congregation. Soon, Adams and his wife, accompanied by Allison, went to Ravenna in northern Italy to learn the art of mosaic, preparing to enhance their church.

During the Communist period in Russia, some big churches were preserved as museums, but the little local churches were destroyed. With no examples to follow, the Victoria congregation looked to older churches in Greece, Yugoslavia and northern Italy.

Being an English-speaking congregation in a little wooden building in Canada, they had to improvise. A carpenter helped them pop a hole up into the rafters, and built the dome. They then installed the heavenly firmament of gold stars spangling an ultramarine sky at the very centre of the dome.

Then, slowly, piece by piece, they created and installed a faithful copy of a sixth-century original of Christ Pantokrator, which they had photographed in Thessaloniki. The congregation met in the basement during the seven years it took to create the dome, which is resplendent with the prophet Ezekiel and his vision.

The mosaicists have returned to the eastern Mediterranean many times, visiting inspiring sites. By studying with a variety of teachers there, they have added special skills such as "micromosaic" to their repertoire. Father Adams, who is not old but has a long white beard, joined Marie and me in the basement workshop and spoke quietly of visiting the mosaic studio at the Vatican, and Marie recalled bringing gifts of maple syrup to win over the caretaker at the church in Thessaloniki.

She showed me the marvellous catalogue from Orsoni, the company in Venice that creates the special glass used in mosaics at famous sites, including San Marco in Venice, Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, mosques in Iran, stupas in Burma, and now ... Saint Sophia in Victoria. Beyond Orsoni's almost infinite range of translucent colours, they also supply glass backed with gold leaf in many shades.

I was surprised to see that the mosaics at Saint Sophia are not grouted flat like bathroom tiles, but have an intentionally irregular surface. Cubes of glass catch light through their edges, which shines across the image, and some of the cubes are set on an angle to enhance this effect.

For faces and costumes, the mosaicists prefer the softer tones of marble, which they cut on a power saw in the basement. While not all the workers are artists, there is much to do for those who simply cut the materials, and fill in backgrounds and borders. The shapes are drawn according to a strict iconography.

"It's a matter of just following," Father Adams said. "We don't want speed. When people work too fast, they don't do beautiful work. Just to keep going is the thing." A sense of quiet, inner and outer, pervades the workshop, "a feeling which will lead to prayer," he said.

As well as her mosaic work, Allison is an icon painter specializing in the egg-tempera technique, an accomplished fresco painter and a longtime participant in the Oak Bay Artists Studio Tour. With the mosaics, she takes the lead in adapting ancient designs to modern spaces, drawing up the figures and setting out the outlines for others to fill.

On the workbench was her latest "micromosaic," a small face of a saint detailed with bits of stone, each lovingly placed on a ground of damp clay. The tesserae she used for the eyes were not much larger than grains of sand.

There is reverence evident in the careful creation of these mosaics, especially in the faces of the saints and prophets.

"It's very nice work to do," Father Adams said. "It doesn't go fast, just piece by piece. Be quiet and pay attention, just keep working. Like what one does with oneself."

A beautiful air of sanctity pervades Saint Sophia Orthodox Church.

For more information, visit the website [saintsophia.ca](http://saintsophia.ca).

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