

Embedded Tiles

Grade levels: 9th-12th and college

Much of the path that winds through Paradise Garden is covered with bits of tile and glass, tools and text, inlaid into the concrete of the walkway. The walkway itself is doubly functional- it elevates the feet of the traveler- the visitors to the Garden, keeping them clean of mud and guiding their journey, while at the same time symbolically providing guidance from this earthly realm to the heavenly.

Decorative tilework surrounded by cement is often referred to as *mosaic*. Mosaic tiles are adhered onto a surface and then surrounded by cement. The process used in this project is more accurately called *embedding*, because the tiles or objects are pressed into the wet cement, or *embedded*, to become part of the surface. Using the pathways of Paradise Garden as inspiration, we can make our own embedded tiles, and learn about one of the processes of making art that Howard Finster used.

Typically Howard began a section of his pathways by building a form out of wood, and then pouring it full of concrete. While the concrete was wet, tiles, glass, tools, and various found objects were embedded into the surface, forming patterns, pictures, and words to guide and enlighten the visitor. For the sake of time and portability, this project uses cement pavers or stepping stones as the base material. The tiles or objects are embedded into either thinset mortar, or concrete.

Materials:

- Thinset mortar (ready mix- you can find it at a hardware store) OR Concrete mix: (1 part Portland cement, 3 parts sand, ½ part water)
- 12x12" or similar size concrete paver (one for each student)
- Various durable objects to form your desired design (bits of tile, glass, beads, marbles, old tools, etc.)
- Gloves
- Old paintbrush
- Sponge
- Container for mixing
- Old screwdriver or tool handle
- Plastic or plastic bag
- Water

1. First lay out your design. You may want to draw it to scale on a piece of paper or lay it out onto the paver itself and then photograph it with your phone to use as a reference (if using your phone, take care not to smudge it with mortar later). Your design can be almost anything: it can be purely decorative, an exploration of shapes and colors, or something more meaningful. Your design is particular to you and your experiences. You might even imagine yourself a messenger, as Howard saw himself. What message would you like to send?
2. Apply a layer of mortar or concrete onto the paver, at a depth of about ¾ to ½ an inch thick, depending on the height of your objects to be embedded.

3. Arrange your objects onto the wet surface of the mortar. You will have around 20 minutes of working time before the mortar sets up. It is not a bad idea to let it firm up a bit before embedding the pieces if the mix is very wet.
4. When you are pleased with the arrangement of materials on the surface, use the tool handle to firmly press the tiles or objects into the surface. The materials should be roughly level with each other and with the surface of the concrete.
5. Use a damp sponge to clean off any large buildup of concrete or mortar on the surface. Don't worry about a slight film of concrete over the design. This will clean up much more easily after it sits overnight. Cover loosely with plastic.
6. After the finished work sets overnight (12 to 24 hours), spray it with water, and use the brush to gently scrub the residue or film from the surface. Rinse again. Although firm to the touch, the finished work will need to cure for around five days to fully harden.

Examples from Paradise Garden:

[Decorative Tilework](#)

[Decorative Tile with Glass and Text](#)

[Decorative Tile with Glass, Text, and Repurposed Objects](#)

[Section of Walkway with Tiles and Tools](#)

Howard Finster was not alone in his use of concrete and mosaic in the world of outsider art. For similar techniques, see Brother Joseph Zoettl's [Ave Maria Grotto](#) in nearby Cullman, AL, or Simon Rodea's [Watt's Towers](#) in Los Angeles.

This project conforms to the following Georgia Department of Education Performance Standards for Visual Arts:

VAHSSCCU.1 Demonstrates an understanding of how art history impacts the creative process of art making.

d. Relates own sculptures to works by master artists.

VAHSSCPR.2 Engages in an array of sculpture processes, techniques, and aesthetic stances.

b. Creates sculpture to serve a specific function, such as expressive, utilitarian, and social.

d. Creates sculpture from various traditional and contemporary media (e.g., clay, metal, stone, plaster, glass, fiber, video).

e. Uses and demonstrates knowledge of traditional and contemporary methods for building sculpture such as additive, subtractive, modeling, casting, and assemblage.

f. Incorporates a variety of techniques in surface quality and texture derived from a variety of sources (e.g., drawing techniques, nature, tool marks, inclusions).

g. Selects sculpture media, techniques and surfaces to evoke specific effect, mood, or concept.