

MOSAIC & GLASS

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“Imperfection is one of the things that makes mosaic beautiful”



Reading Time: 15 minutes

Pictured above: *Deco Bathtub*. A clawfoot bathtub mosaicked by Amy Neiman. Tile, stained and mirrored glass.

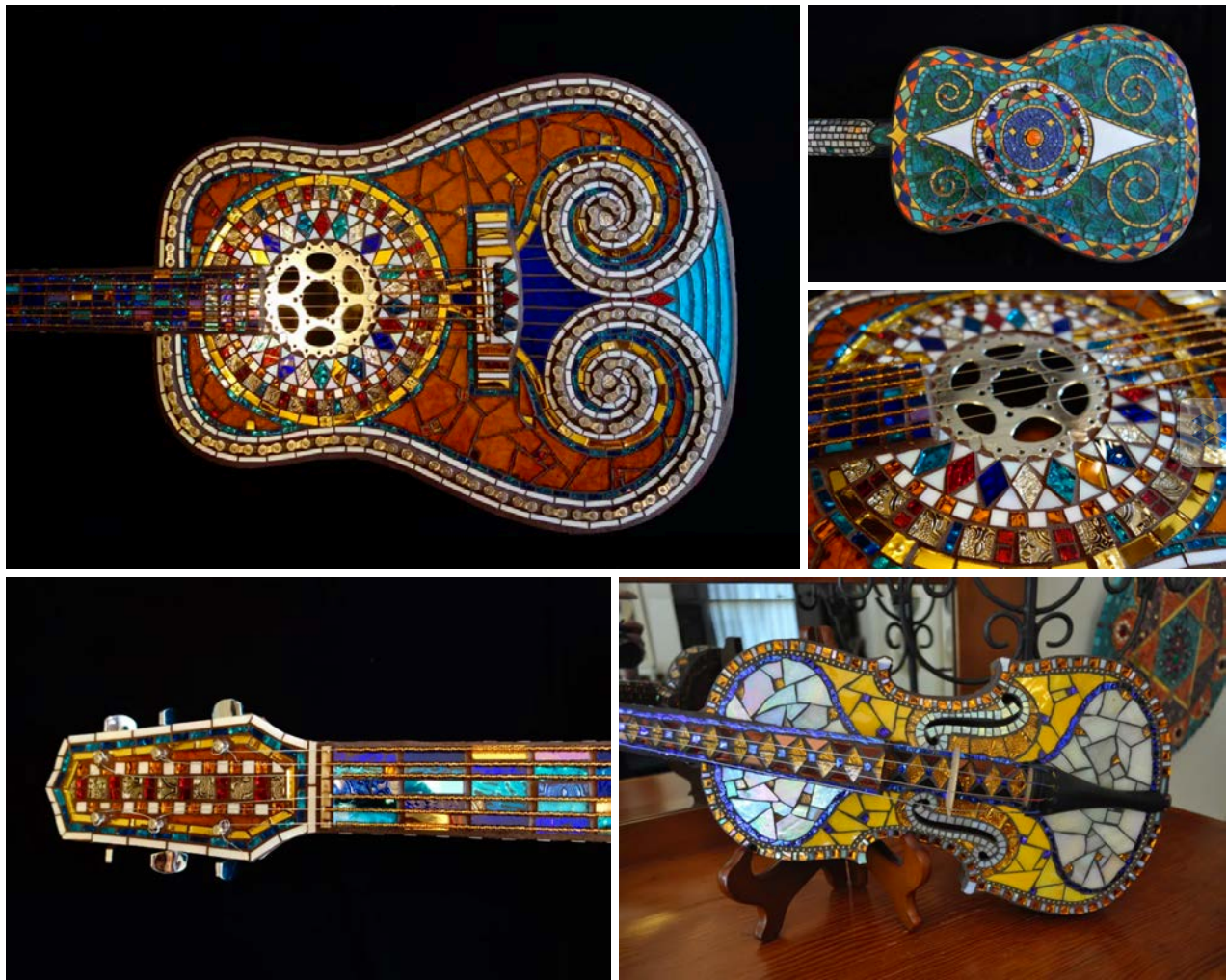
In our latest interview, Rhona Duffy puts ten questions to American artist Amy Neiman. A graphic designer by profession, Amy says the desire to learn mosaic art was brewing inside her for some time before she started studying and creating mosaics back in 2003. Amy shares her inspirations, favorite techniques and materials, technical tips, plans for the future and more.

How did you discover and choose to specialize in mosaic?

Like so many people who fall in love with mosaics, I have always been drawn to pattern, color, and texture, as well as ornamentation and fine detail. One of my favorite activities to do as a child was to find as many coins as I could — I won't say where I found those coins — and sit at the kitchen table, arranging them in all kinds of patterns. I didn't know it at the time, but I was creating intricate mosaics. Luckily, I didn't glue them to the kitchen table!

Throughout my life, anytime I saw mosaics I was drawn to them. In 2003, I was at a craft fair in Berkeley, CA that I had gone to for many years. For the first time, there was a mosaic artist there and I found her work inspiring. When I told her I was interested in learning how to do mosaics, I was impressed that not only didn't she brush me off as someone who wasn't going to buy anything, but she pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down the name Laurel True. She said that Laurel taught classes in Oakland, CA. I immediately googled her, was blown away by what I saw on her website, and started studying with her. To this day, I consider Laurel a mentor and friend. After Laurel founded The Institute of Mosaic Art, I studied there with her and many other incredible teachers, as well as taking workshops in Italy, Mexico, France, and at the Society of American Mosaic Artists (SAMA) conferences.

As luck would have it, the year I started doing mosaics, the SAMA conference was held in San Francisco, near where I live. I didn't realize that some of the people I met and shared dinners with were already mosaic superstars. From the start, I found the mosaic community incredibly welcoming, supportive, and eager to share their passion and knowledge.

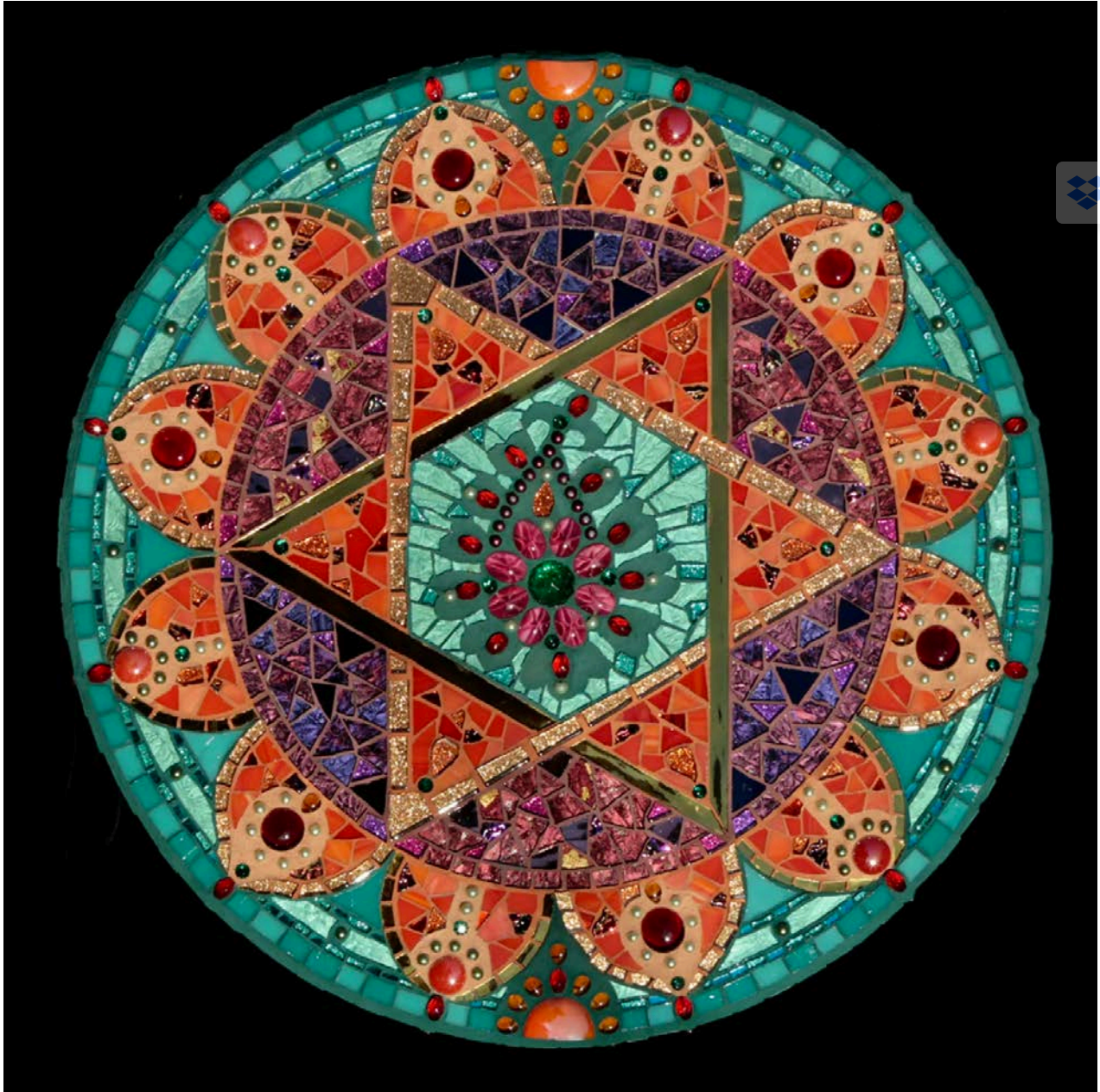


Above: Amy Neiman enjoys mosaicking full-size musical instruments, including guitars and violins. The pieces above were made with a variety of materials, including stained glass, mirrored and dichroic glass, gold smalti, bicycle chain, bicycle gears, seed beads (guitar strings) and ball chain.

My profession is graphic design and my career began long before the use of the computer. In those days, we did everything by hand — sketching, setting type, and creating the art that would be pasted on a board with all the specifications required to go to the printer. We made intricate “comps” or prototypes of packages, brochures or stationery by using rubdown type and all kinds of other artsy-craftsy methods that took a lot of painstaking skill, but were fun as well. Much of the hand work involved in my job disappeared with the computer. The wonderful new tool that sped up and simplified many tasks took away a lot of the reasons I went into the design field in the first place.

As someone who has always been a maker, I found I still needed things I could do by hand. Over the years, I did many needle and other crafts, and was very

taken with the art of quilt making. But that’s difficult to get into when you don’t really like sewing. Discovering mosaics enabled me to combine all the art influences that inspire me, and incorporate both the visual elements I love and the physical act of making in a way that appealed to me.



Hinjew by Amy Neiman. 18" diameter. Stained, Van Gogh, mirrored, glitter and dichroic glass, glass blobs, glass beads.

In a way, it takes me back to my beginnings in mosaic. My mother could draw well and was very artistic, so she always supplied me with creative and fun things to do. When I was quite young, I received a mosaic-by-number kit. The substrate had a printed outline for each *tessera* with a number in it, indicating which color to use. The board was adhesive so I peeled off the paper to reveal

as large a section as I wanted to work on, and stuck each tile to the sticky board. After laying down all the little plastic tiles in the right places (some upside down, I later noticed), I used the packet of premixed grout supplied, smeared it over the whole thing and wiped it off. Voilà — I had created my very first mosaic. My mother saved that masterpiece and I still have it, although it now requires some restoration.

What or who inspires your work?

My inspirations come from everywhere. I am always inspired by other art and artists — ancient and modern, mosaic and otherwise (El Anatsui is one of my favorite artists) — but as a very visual person who loves detail and embellishment, it doesn't take much to get my juices flowing. I love to travel and am especially inspired by patterns from all cultures in art, architecture, and fashion. For example, I live near an area with a lot of Indian sari shops and the designs, ornamentation, and color combinations have influenced some of my mosaic projects. On every trip I take I seek out mosaics, both old and new. Over the years, I have accumulated a very extensive mosaic library and I love paging through these and other art books for inspiration and to see how my interests and tastes have changed as my skills have grown.





Pantone 205G by Amy Neiman. 7.5" X 10". Stained glass.

What are your favorite materials, tools, and techniques?

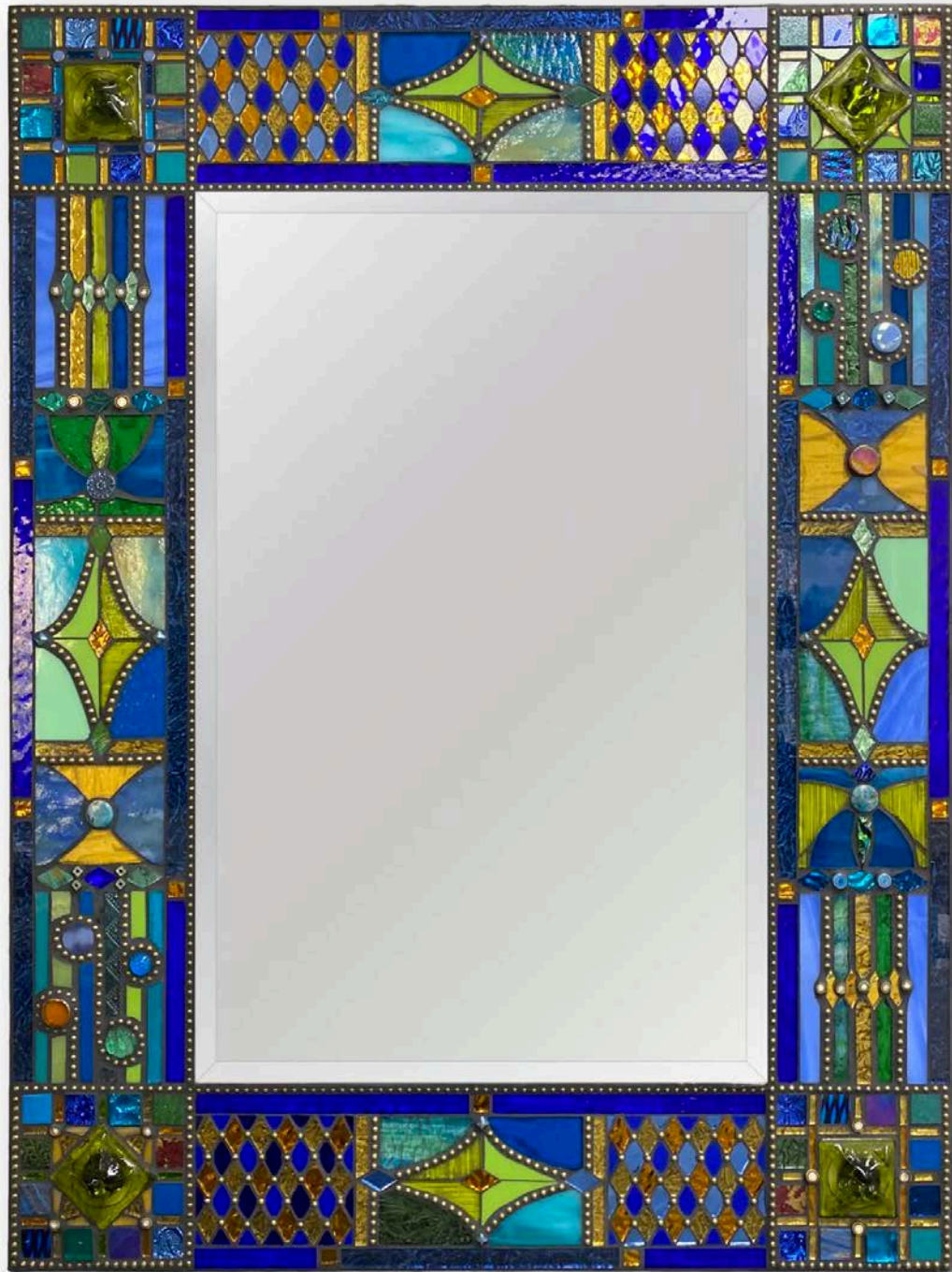
I have the most experience with glass, tile, and ceramics, but I have also worked with smalti and other materials. Many of my favorite pieces utilize multiple types of material in the same piece.

I don't know if it's because my father owned a hardware store or because the man I live with has every tool known to man, but I am a bit of a tool junkie. I do seem to gravitate toward a select few glass nippers, but as new tools and materials come to market, I like trying out different ones.

For indoor pieces, I started out using mainly plywood as my substrate, but am gravitating toward the lighter boards that are now more readily available and able to be used for both indoor and outdoor work. I have also made my own substrates with fiberglass mesh and acrylic concrete.

There are so many different and wonderful techniques in mosaic that it has been hard to curb my tendency to go in too many different directions. As I explore them, I try to take things from each technique and each teacher, and incorporate them into my own ever-growing toolbox.





Sue's Mirror by Amy Neiman. 24" X 32". Stained glass, Van Gogh, mirrored, and dichroic glass, glass gems and embellishments, ball chain

Can you explain a bit about the processes and approaches you take in your work?

My approach varies, depending on what the project is for and how much time I have. When I pre-plan a piece carefully, the execution goes faster even though I always still make changes as I go. If I am working with a client, I use the computer and work in Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop to fully flesh out a design and show a color layout. But if the piece is just for me, I might do a rougher sketch and work more organically, letting my materials inspire and influence my direction, experimenting and making changes along the way. I used to think I was very slow, but in actuality, my lack of speed is always caused by being stumped on my direction. 

One of my favorite things to do is to build a palette of materials, laying them across my table and seeing how the colors, finishes, and textures go together. Sometimes, I do that without even having a project or specific subject in mind and it materializes later.

I take a lot of work-in-progress pictures and find it fun to see how things change along the way. Sometimes what is originally in my head does not work at all so seeing some of the iterations along the way can be useful.

When I started doing mosaics, it was just something I did for myself so I didn't keep track of how long anything took (anyone reading this who knows me will be laughing). Since mosaics is not yet my day job, I still prefer to do work I love and hope that someone will want to buy it. In recent years though, I've kept track of my time so I have a better feel for what to charge when I do commissions.



Portrait of Marcia by Amy Neiman. 12" x 12". Ceramic dishes, Van Gogh glass.

What have been your favorite projects to date?

My favorite projects are usually the ones I am working on at the moment. I have a claw-foot bathtub that I worked on for twelve years (see above re: laughing), not because it should have taken that long, but because it weighed around 400 lbs and was in our cold and dirty carport — a place not conducive to wanting to work on it much of the year. When we moved to a new house, we purposely placed it outside our front door, a space that was slated to be a pretty sitting area. Between wanting to get it done to take back that space, and the fact that it was now in a light and warm place to work, I finally completed it! We poured a concrete slab in our garden for it to sit on and it's a focal point that I love seeing every day.



Another of those “life’s work” kind of projects is a piece I call *China Air*. The substrate is wood and it was probably made by hand to be a child’s rocking horse, except it’s not a horse — it’s an airplane. I found it years ago in a reuse store and mosaicked the whole thing using U.S. souvenir plates (thus the name) with some parts in stained glass to give the eye a place to rest. I worked on it on and (mostly) off for seven years.

I did portraits of my parents after they passed away, which was very cathartic, although I wish they could have seen them. I’ve done quite a few 2-D pieces which have included portraits, decorative mirrors, and abstracts, and many 3-D pieces including guitars, a violin, shoes, and several pieces where I created the substrates out of foam core, fiberglass mesh and concrete.



Portrait of my Father by Amy Neiman. 12" x 12". Tile and ceramic dishes, stained glass.

I'd say I enjoy decorative or abstract pattern work the most, but have challenged myself at times with representational work.



Celebrating Bart by Amy Neiman. 12" x 12". Tile and ceramic dishes, stained glass, National Geographic magazine covers.

Does mosaic help you in other areas of your life?

Every creative endeavor I've done in my life, whether art, dance, or music, has helped me in some aspect of my life, but mosaic art is beneficial to me because it has a very forgiving nature. I am often very hard on myself but imperfection is one of the things that makes mosaic beautiful. When I am

involved in a project and in the “zone,” everything else falls away, which is a very handy thing to be able to do (unless you are cooking something).

Teaching mosaic has been an unexpected joy in my life. Other than teaching photography one summer in a camp, I had never taught before, so when I reluctantly agreed to teach mosaic classes I did it with a lot of trepidation. But I soon learned that teaching something you’re passionate about is not only fun and rewarding, but getting great feedback from students and feeling like I’m able to give to them what my best teachers gave to me is an amazing gift.

Of all the art forms I’ve tried, mosaic has had the most sticking power (pun intended). In addition, living in an earthquake zone helps me to feel that if the big one comes and the beautiful ceramic collection we have gets broken, I’ll be able to make lemons out of lemonade (so to speak)!





Mirror Mandala by Amy Neiman. 24" diameter. Stained, mirrored and dichroic glass, glass gems, ball chain.

Could you share three technical tips about your favored materials/techniques to help other mosaicists?

In my spare time, I teach some of the mosaic classes at Stained Glass Garden in Berkeley, CA, so these responses are things I tell my students.

Tip #1: When you are working in the direct method using thinset or other adhesives, particularly from hard-to-squeeze tubes, put some into a small, freezer-weight ziplock bag and cut a small hole to pipe it out. It's

cleaner, the hole can be whatever size you need — in some cases very small which is great for tiny details — but most importantly for me, it’s much easier on my hands and wrists. When I teach I always make the same joke, and that is to say, “I invented this technique... but so did everyone else!”

Tip #2: For those just getting started, don’t think of anything as just one color. If you want to do a blue background for sky for example, use multiple shades instead of just one, or use “color hits” that might just be tiny pieces of colors from other elements in your mosaic to tie the piece together and make your design more cohesive.



Tip #3: Take lots of work-in-progress pictures! Especially when doing portraits or other representational work. A photo gives a much more accurate visual of what’s going on than the naked eye.

What advice would you give someone new to mosaic?

I’d give the same advice as I’d give to anyone learning anything new: practice — a lot. Experiment, make mistakes, screw stuff up, ask questions, keep going. Learn from good teachers, use quality materials, and don’t cut corners (there are a lot YouTube videos online that don’t illustrate best practices). Work beyond your comfort level. Not everything has to be, or will be, a masterpiece. This is “do as I say, not as I do” type advice. But I’m trying!

What’s keeping you busy at the moment?

If procrastination counts as being busy, I’m very busy at the moment working on a very belated cat portrait for my nephew’s 30th birthday, several mosaic mirror commissions, and a mosaic on a large rock in the front of our house for our address. That, and playing fetch with my cats Cole and Porter several times a day.

What are your plans for 2024 and beyond?

I’m starting to wind down my career in graphic design so I’d like to start spending more concentrated time making mosaics and trying to follow some of the excellent advice I give to my students!



About Amy Neiman

Amy Neiman is a graphic designer and production artist who began studying mosaics in 2003 and has been creating them ever since. She uses mostly glass, tile, and ceramic, loves the variety and vibrancy of the materials available, and the variation of techniques and effects she can achieve. The ability to create pieces that are decorative, functional, or both, and the strength and permanence of mosaics greatly appeals to her. Teaching enables her to share her love of this art and spread the joy.