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## JEAN PIERRE SOALHAT - THE REBIRTH OF ANCIENT STONE

### **AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-PIERRE SOALHAT, MOSAIC ARTIST.**

*Jean-Pierre Soalhat, Renowned Mosaic Artist Welcomed Us Into His Studio Where We Discussed His Career And His Craft*

#### **When did you decide to pursue your career as a mosaic artist on a full time basis?**

I had my first contact with them while on an archeological dig during summer vacation when I was sixteen years old. I began in Soisson where I restored some mosaics. It was at that moment that I became fascinated. From then on, I always worked on them when I had the time. When I turned forty-five I realized that it was time to do what was important to me. Before then, I worked to have some free time to do mosaics. Then I decided that it was time to do the opposite, so I sold everything I had and began pursuing it full-time. Everyone was apprehensive, especially my family.

#### **Had you already sold any of your mosaics before?**

Never. It was a risk, but it was very rewarding. I was lucky, my first table went to New York, and immediately afterward I was in a show in Paris and I had three articles about me in interior design magazines. I was really very lucky.

#### **What have been some of the influences on your work?**

Most of all I'm fascinated by roman antiquity. For the most part, I use ancient materials such as pottery and broken marble, which I buy from antique dealers. The use of these ancient materials is crucial for to me.

#### **How many hours a day do you work?**

It can vary, but normally I start around 7:30 in the morning. When I have a table to finish, I can work as much as ten hours a day.

#### **What are the steps involved in the creation of a mosaic table?**

First of all, I must gather the materials. I'm

always on the lookout. Now people know this and as soon as they find old pieces of pottery or broken pieces of marble, they bring them to me. I've stockpiled a fair amount. Next I create a design or I copy one that I've seen somewhere that I like.

**And so you take different motifs and combine them?**

Yes, but they're always Greek or Roman motifs. I must say that I'm fascinated by the work of Salviati, who created the mosaics of the Opera Garnier in Paris. He reinvented the system of indirect setting. This technique makes it possible to create large works in mosaic. For example, I did the floor of a jewelry store in the United States, which I made here in my studio in squares that were later fitted and installed there. The site had been prepared in advance. It's a technique that allows you to create your work in one place and have it installed in another. It's really ingenious.

**How long does it take you to complete a table?**

It depends. Usually it takes from one to two months. I can make about a dozen a year. It's a very limited production.

**Could you hire someone? Train someone or farm out some of the work?**

No. What I like most about this work is the way it connects me to the past. It's like following footsteps. It's incredible knowing that my tables are created from pieces of roman tile that someone made 2000 years ago. Since then they've been forgotten, they've lost their value. And 2000 years later, I recover them and I create something that's worth a thousand times more. An American woman once told me that she thought her table brought her luck: that she could feel its aura. This is why I can't work with modern materials. In a way, I take what has been passed on to me and I create something, something that has already "lived." That is what's important to me.

**Your clients are mostly American?**

About 95%.

**Why is that?**

Perhaps Americans are more sensitive to objects that have passed through the centuries. Perhaps people here in Europe are more accustomed to living among old stones – in any case they're less receptive to my work. For example, the house in which I live is a thousand years old and it's bizarre to imagine the number of people who have lived here before. I consider it my home even though I'm essentially a transient like those who have been here before me.

**Anything else you'd like to add?**

Every time I sell a table, I have a specific requirement – to be invited, just once, to the home of my client and to dine at the table that I've created. I've become friends with nearly all of my clients. I love to see my tables in situ. Each time it's different. On more than one occasion it's taken me a few moments to recognize one of my own tables. I am used to seeing them in the clutter of my studio and suddenly, in these people's homes, I see them lit by spotlights or by big silver chandeliers. Once one of my hosts even went so far as to buy transparent plates so we could see the table while we ate. It's a pleasure to see my mosaics "reborn" in my clients' homes; to see the footprints, the link preserved.

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