

FLORENTINE MOSAICS

and Richard Almond Blow





Shell/1970 (52.3 cm. by 38 cm.)

Richard A. Blow in his Montici workshop shown with
his assistant; Florence, Italy, 1973.

Florentine Mosaics and Richard Almond Blow

Essay by Matila Simon

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University Collection of Richard Almond Blow Florentine
Mosaics.

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Composition/1966 (33 cm. by 24 cm.)

Richard Almond Blow was born in La Salle, Illinois, on February 22, 1904, the youngest of four children of George and Adele Matthiessen Blow. George Blow was the scion of a family that traces its ancestry to the Virginia House of Burgesses and further back to John Blow, 17th century English organist, composer, and teacher of Henry Purcell, English composer. George, whose wife counted several Danish whaling captains among her forebears, remained true to another Blow heritage of interest in shipping and the sea. He was an officer in the United States Navy and, at the time of the sinking of the "Maine" in 1898, was a lieutenant on that ship from which he was lucky enough to be rescued.

Richard Blow, his sister, and two brothers spent their childhood on the family estate, Deer Park, near La Salle before going off to school. Richard attended Woodberry Forest School in Virginia and then Lawrenceville in preparation for Princeton where he studied architecture. His interest in art began early, stimulated by watching his mother who had studied art in Paris before her marriage. It was her habit to roam the estate sketching from nature, and Richard recalls following her around and making his own drawings. It is certain that his interest in nature, animals, birds, and insects began early, also, for he kept many odd pets and began collections of butterflies. When he was about fifteen or sixteen, he conceived the idea of a very large work of art, a mural that covered the inner walls of a porch that extended around three sides of the family mansion. The mural represented, in trompe l'oeil, an 18th century outdoor garden scene. Unfortunately, no efforts were made to preserve the work and it eventually succumbed to wind and weather, but descriptions of it by knowledgeable visitors have survived and it was described to this writer as "perfectly enchanting" and "truly extraordinary," opinions easy enough to accept by one fortunate enough to have seen large quantities of Blow's work in easel painting and mural decoration.

During his three years of architectural studies at Princeton, Blow found free rein for his sharp sense of humor as a cartoonist for the *Tiger*. His inclination to art

became a compelling force which took him from Princeton to the study of painting under Professor Leon Kroll at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1926, Blow went to Europe with his older brother and recalls of this trip their descending the Seine in a canoe. In 1927, he purchased a Renaissance villa, Piazza Calda, situated on a hilltop in Santa Margherita a Montici, across the Arno from Florence. Sadly neglected by its previous owner, the house and grounds required extensive renovations. To accomplish these, Blow hired an English architect, Cecil Pinsent, a man with a great feeling for and knowledge of Renaissance architecture and landscaping. Restoration of house and grounds took many years, and the ultimate result was a delightful, livable house set in terraced gardens, a tower studio, stone obelisks, a grotto, magnificent trees, and splendid views from every window and from any angle. During the very early restoration period, Blow attended the Beaux-Arts in Paris for a few months, studying with Andre Lhote. Then from late 1927 and for the half century following, Piazza Calda became his European residence and studio and eventually the birthplace of the Montici Marbles—20th century Florentine Mosaic.

Until 1941, Blow lived as might be expected of an independently wealthy man and a talented artist. He traveled back and forth between Europe and the United States, painted constantly wherever he was, and exhibited work in various group shows until 1938, when he had his first one-man show at the Maynard Walker Gallery in New York. Critical notices for this show praised the artist for his free handling of the brush, his fine composition, and his use of subtle color in works variously described as nostalgic, classical, and sculptural in feeling. It is interesting to note that Blow's favorite classical artist is Piero della Francesca, and there is in his landscapes, his figure painting, and his still lifes, the same quiet, grave strength, the same perfection in perspective, the same feeling for luminosity and light, and for color. At the time of his first one-man show, perspicacious collectors began to acquire his paintings. Among these we may note the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, and Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago.

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, in line with family tradition and already a licensed airplane pilot, Blow entered the Navy as a lieutenant in the Air Arm. Overage for combat duty (he was thirty-seven), after he had completed his training at Pensacola, he ferried personnel to Europe from the Naval Flying Base near Washington, D.C., before being assigned as an instructor at the Naval Air Force Training Base at Kokomo, Indiana. Out of this assignment, which he did not particularly enjoy, came a nickname, "Kokomo Joe" Blow, which endures in the signature "Joe" on letters to relatives and close friends. After Indiana, he became Naval Attaché for the Caribbean area and was stationed in the islands. Finally, he was variously posted in San Francisco, Hawaii, and the Philippines; from all these places he flew the "big ones" across the Pacific as far as Shanghai. When the war ended, Blow was a lieutenant commander and had flown countless missions in DC 2's, DC 4's, Army B-25's, and twin-engined Grummans. Between 1946 and 1954, when this was still a novelty, while he was in the United States he piloted a twin-engined Cessna, using as his principal base a rather woodchuck-infested private field in Dutchess County, New York. A serious automobile accident on an icy road in 1954 put an abrupt end to Blow's flying days.

Immediately after the war in 1947, Blow returned to Italy to spend several months there as had been his habit. He had always been interested in Florentine Mosaics, and he now conceived the idea of setting up a workshop on his own property to revive an art form first developed by the Medici family. Villa Piazza Calda, admirably located for wartime observation and reconnaissance—it has a sweeping view across the valley of the Arno—had been occupied by the British and was the object of some attention by the Germans who clung desperately to the city of Florence and the surrounding countryside, doing considerable damage, some irreparable, to historic buildings. Fortunately, Piazza Calda escaped relatively unscathed, for it became to the art of Pietre Intarsiate (Pietre Dure, Florentine Mosaic) what the gardens of San Marco and the Uffizi had been during the Renaissance.

The tradition of working with marble and precious stones goes back to antiquity, although during the Middle Ages it had almost entirely disappeared, remaining principally in the art of engraving semiprecious and precious stones to use as seals. But during the Age of Humanism, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Duke of Florence, undertook a series of experiments with both precious and semiprecious stones and to accomplish the experiments set up workshops in the gardens of the Convent of San Marco. In principal, the idea was to imitate antique models, but quite soon the workers began to draw further and further away from the past. Among the most famous men working for Lorenzo were Piero di Neri de'Ramazzanti, a very skillful engraver of precious gems; his pupil, Giovanni, called delle Corniole (carnelian); and Piermaria Sebaldi, called il Tagliacarne (cutter of flesh or fruit).

In the mid-16th century, under Cosimo and more especially his son, Francesco I, "foreign masterworkers" were imported from Germany, Lombardy, Venice, and the Netherlands to work with the Florentines and Tuscans. Goldsmiths, stonecutters, cabinet makers, and potters added their skills to the traditional working of stones and the art of sculpture. The famous Fonderia (Foundry) was set up where men worked in glass and porcelain, melted down rock crystal and precious metals, and performed experiments in pharmacy and alchemy.

When Buontalenti succeeded Vasari as grand-ducal architect in 1574, he transformed the Uffizi from its original use as a simple administrative building into a museum, complete with galleries, workshops, and a theatre, and the laboratories moved into the building. In 1587, Ferdinand I succeeded his brother as Grand Duke of Florence. He set up rules for the artisans' workshops, naming for each one a responsible superintendent and a second in command, thus creating a hierarchy that constituted the basic structure for the Opificio (works). The laboratories for working in stone and other "clean" workshops, such as for cabinet making, remained in the Uffizi, but the rock crystal laboratory was moved to the Boboli Gardens, probably because of the smoke engen-

dered. The system set up by Ferdinando lasted for nearly two centuries and became the Statale Opificio delle Pietre Dure (Government Works in Florentine Mosaic). During this period its finest works were produced.

Ferdinando I was, to put it mildly, enamored of the possibilities inherent in the working of marble and semiprecious stones into highly polished, colorful mosaic pictures. Workers in the Opificio spent ten years learning the art of cutting and polishing in order to work on the creation of the Medici Chapel, a mausoleum that endures today, a riot of floral designs covering wall panels, pillars, altar, ceiling arches, and floor.

To gather the necessary semiprecious stones (Siberian malachite, Egyptian lapis, Labrador stone, Swedish porphyry, Flemish basalt, Bohemian jasper, French agate, Swiss chalcedony), Ferdinand ordered his ships' captains to bring back the finest specimens they could find. Money, of course, was no object, and Ferdinand paid high prices for the chunks of stone that then had to be studied carefully by the artisans before they were sliced, cut, and polished to bring out the finest graining and the richest colors, just as diamond cutters work with rough diamonds to produce glittering faceted gems. The production of the Chapel was slow, difficult, and costly. Begun in the late 16th century, work on it ended in 1742. Many of the last artisans who worked on the Chapel were sons and grandsons of the original workers.

Work on the Chapel had barely been completed when the Medici family became extinct and was replaced by the Lorena family. This was, as we must remember, at the height of the Era of Enlightenment, and a vast program of reforms was instituted for reorganizing and rearranging the Medici collections. It was decided in 1853 to relocate the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in a building on the Via degli Alfani which had been the Monastery of San Niccolò. The Opificio, now the Museo delle Pietre Dure, is still located in this building. It has the honor of being the oldest institute for restoration of works of art in the world.

With the advent of the Kingdom of Italy, the two basic activities of the Opificio, restoration and creation of new works, went through an unexpected crisis. The Italian court was not particularly interested in the creation of mosaics and the country was in the throes of a serious economic crisis. To these were added those crises in art and in artisanship that marked the close of the 19th century all over Europe.

For a while it looked as if the Opificio would have to close its doors as had other government studio-workshops that had flourished from the 16th and 19th centuries: Prague, Madrid, and Naples closed down their great centers for the manufacture of glass, porcelain, and ceramics. However, the skills handed down from father to son, from generation to generation, the profound knowledge acquired through centuries of work, were still needed in the restoration of old mosaics. A few new mosaics were executed in the Baptistery in Florence in 1880, and there was some work done at San Vitale in Ravenna and the Basilica di Parmezzo and San Lorenzo in Milan. The Opificio sent out its artisans to all of Italy repairing, restoring, preserving this form of art, keeping the tradition of working in semiprecious stones.

Because of poor restoration and repair, lack of taste in selecting subjects for small "pictures in stone," compromise in materials used, and the addition of printers' ink or paint to make up for inferior coloration, the art of Florentine Mosaic had almost died before the advent of World War II. When the war ended, Italy's energies were directed principally to agriculture, electrical power output, and hard industry. There seemed little room for the production of works of art that require years of apprenticeship, costly materials, and the eye of an artist to supervise basic designs and perfection in the finished product.

Richard Blow believed that what this art needed he could provide. With the help of two young Italian artists, Constantino Nivola and Eva Carocci, Blow supplied modern designs and, it must be added, a great many

dollars. He also suggested the use of an electric saw to reduce the time required to cut the stones. But the workers found the hand saw preferable, especially since the stones were often only three millimeters in thickness. And in the workshop at the Villa Piazza Calda, Florentine Mosaic came to life again, with the advice and stimulation provided by Lando Bartoli, then the head of the Opificio. The perfectionist requirements of Richard Blow resulted in a series of pictures of dancing girls, still lifes, landscapes, birds, fish, animals, horses, mermaids, sea shells, flowers, fruits, guns, engines, balloons, all of them in marble and semiprecious stones. All of the pictures were worked over long and lovingly, subjected to the artist's final approval, honestly and faithfully made in the finest stones, and rejected if imperfect. When completed and accepted, each piece was marked with a tiny M stone insert as a Montici signature and signed on the back by Blow himself.

The Opificio or Museo delle Pietre Dure in Florence now contains a great many of Blow's pictures, the only ones considered worthy to hang with works created before the Medici family disappeared. Other Blow pictures, boxes, obelisks, and table tops enrich the homes of wealthy collectors all over the world. The collection presented to Oregon State University demonstrates to artists and art connoisseurs why these works are unique. To have seen them created from the sketch to the final acceptance was, for this writer, a privilege, a return to another world that is vanishing so rapidly it will soon be only a distant memory, an anguished one for those who treasure individualism, craftsmanship, and the application of fine art to everyday living. Imitations of these works will be made for years, but the workshop in Santa Margherita a Montici will produce no more original designs. Richard Blow continues to paint in his studios in Italy and in New York. His pictures in stone will endure for centuries. For this we must be grateful.

Matila Simon

A sensitive contemporary artist, with the simple tools and materials of antiquity, has created a new world of visual beauty. The Art Collection of Oregon State University has been greatly enriched by this gift from the Richard A. Blow Family.

Gordon W. Gilkey, Dean

The Blow Family is most appreciative of the informative essay by Matila Simon and, through David Blow, acknowledges the help of the following in the preparation of the Collection: Professor Gordon W. Gilkey, Dean, and Dr. Donna Cruse, Asst. Dean, College of Liberal Arts, Oregon State University; and graphic design, Marilyn Holsinger, Oregon State University Press; Mrs. Hugh Jones of Fleur Feighan, New York City; Mr. and Mrs. Schmeucker and Miss Muriel King of Bethel, Connecticut; Mrs. Anita Nicholson, Hammond Museum, North Salem, New York.

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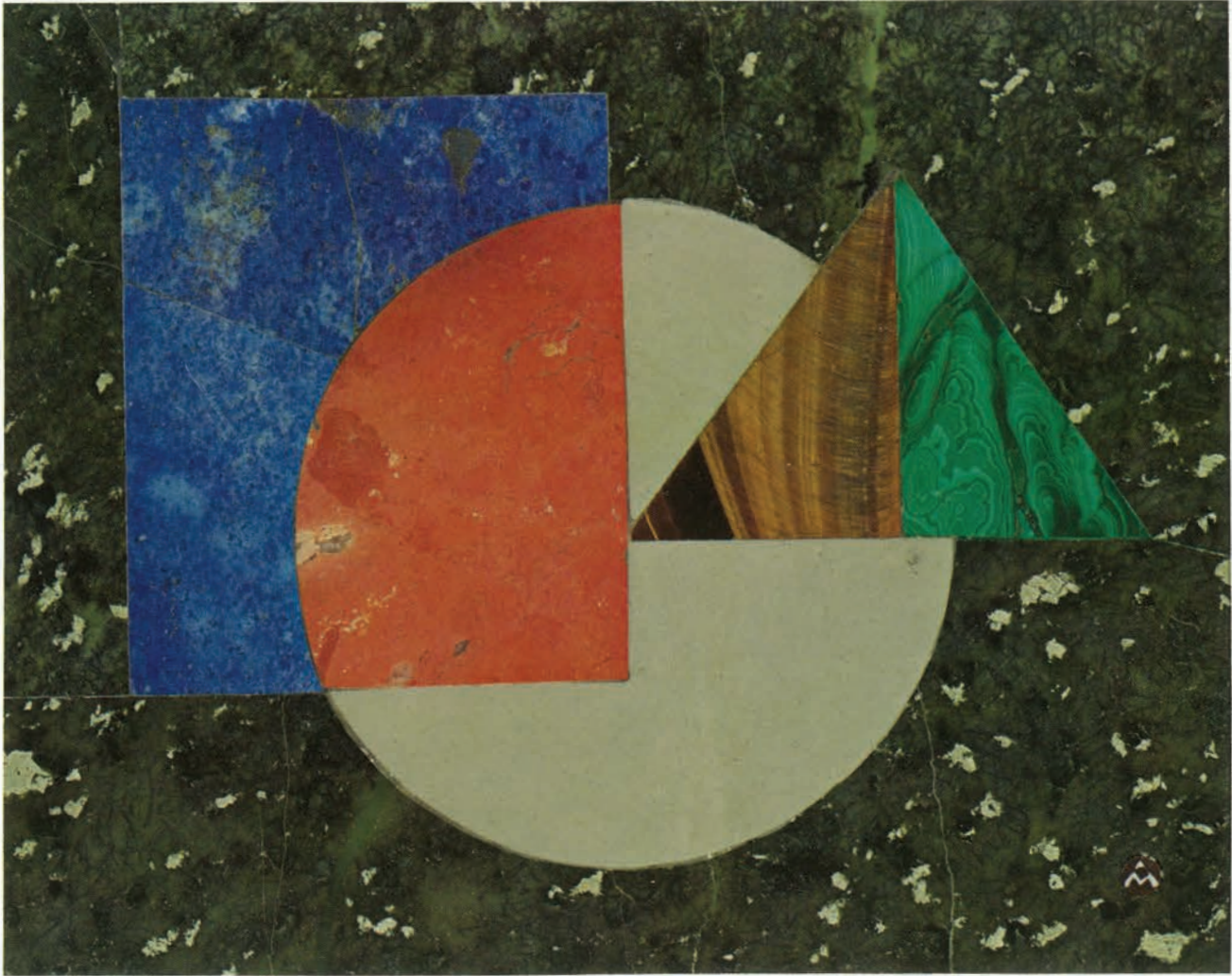
Published documents consulted were:

Sammett, Eli, May, 1963. It started with the Medici. *Trade with Italy*.

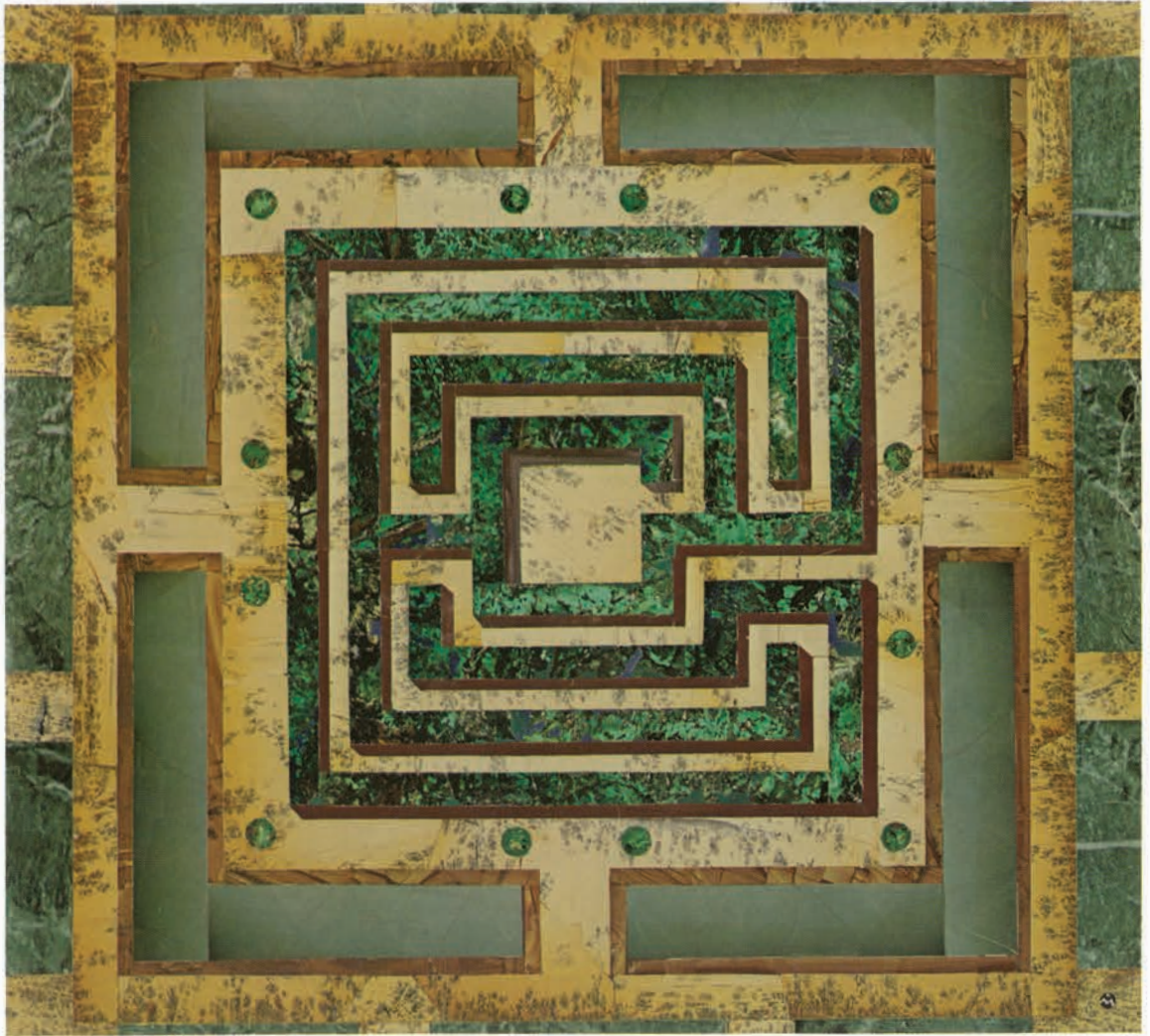
Maggiora, Carlo, Oct.-Nov. 1956. Il Museo delle Pietre Dure in Firenze. *Bolletino Technico degli Architetti e Ingegneri della Toscana*.

Baldini, Umberto e Dal Poggetto, Paolo, 1972. *Firenze Restaura, Guida alla Mostra*. Firenze, G. C. Sansoni.

Burrow, Carlyle, July 17, 1938. *Four New Canvasses Bought by Museum*, New York *Herald-Tribune*, New York.



Abstraction/1967 (12.5 cm. by 10 cm.)



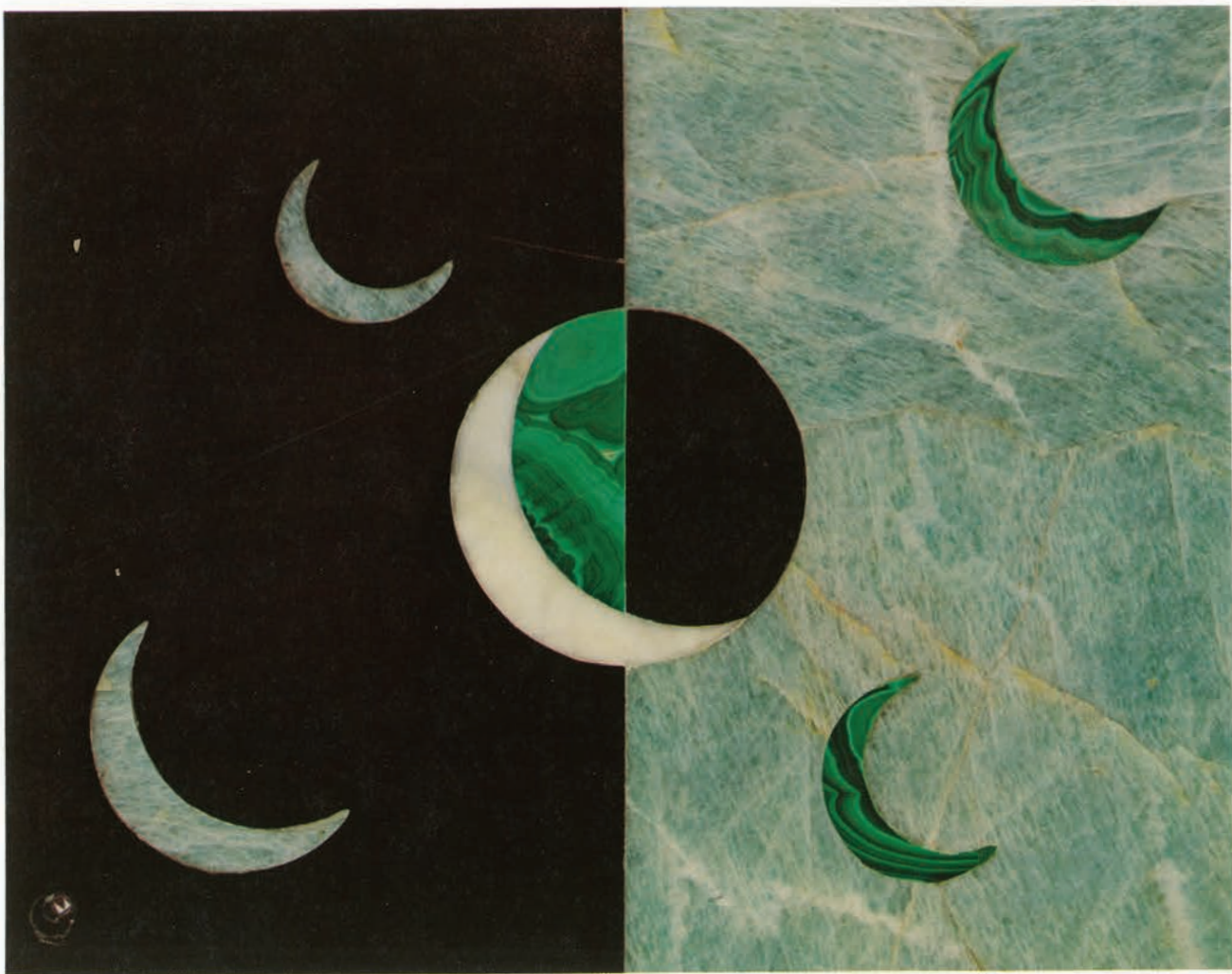
Maze/1967 (26.1 cm. by 23.4 cm.)



Sea Life/1967 (22.2 cm. by 16.6 cm.)



Coiled Snake/1968 (22 cm. by 22 cm.)



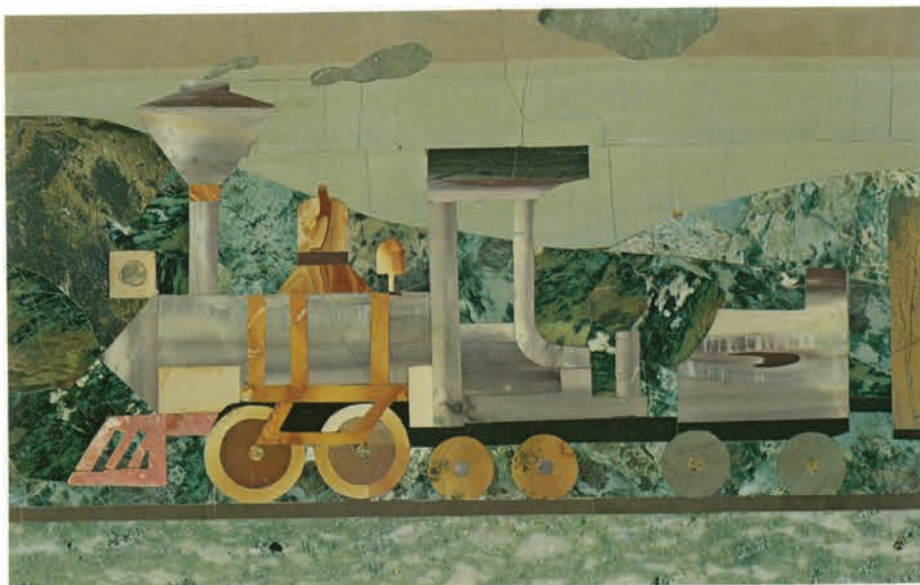
Malachite & Crescent Moons/1968 (17.1 cm. by 13.6 cm.)



Triangles/1968 (13.2 cm. by 10.2 cm.)



Two Figures/1968 (48.4 cm. by 36.4 cm.)



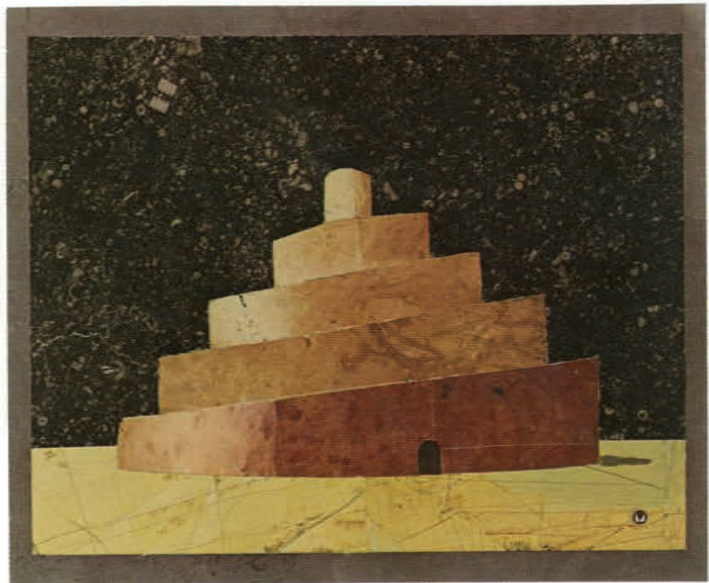
Railroad Engine/1968 (38.6 cm. by 23.9 cm.)



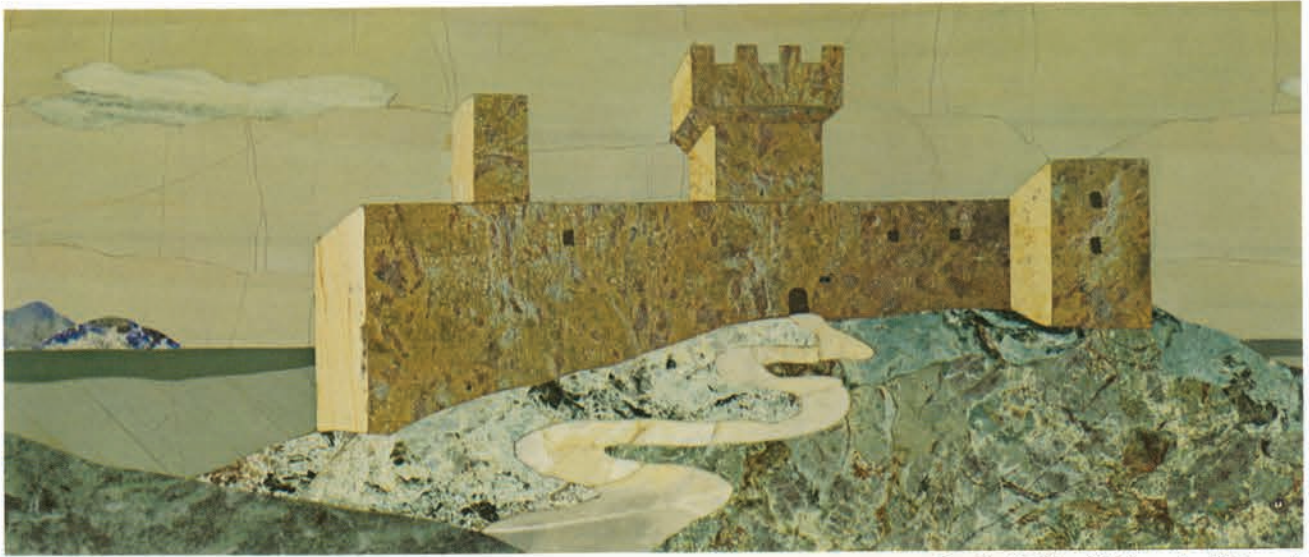
Siren/1969 (43.5 cm. by 33 cm.)



Yellow Griffin/1969 (22.1 cm. by 15.9 cm.)



Tower of Babel/1969 (18.3 cm. by 15.4 cm.)



Castle/1970 (31.9 cm. by 13.4 cm.)



Two Pistols/1970 (29.8 cm. by 16 cm.)



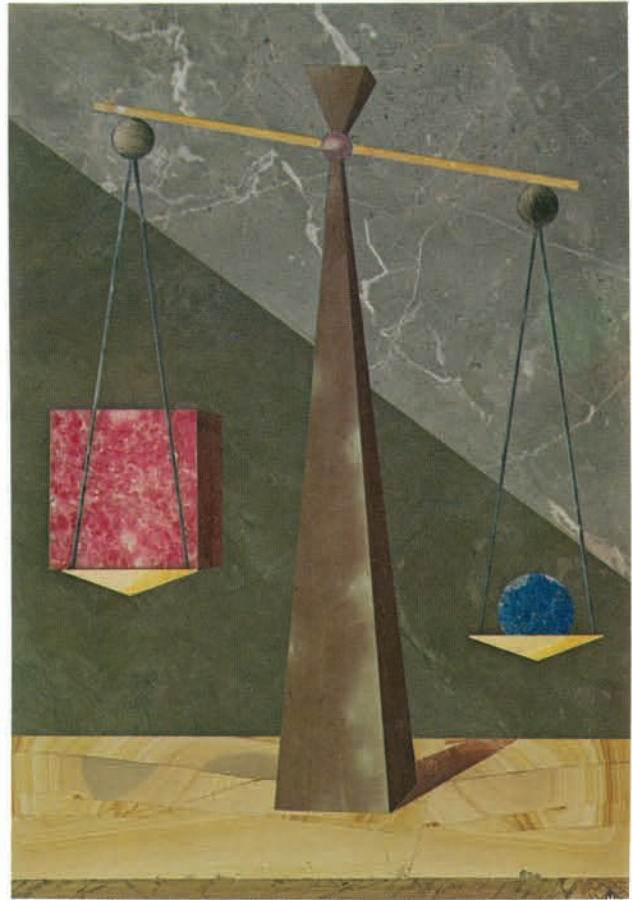
Hand with Ring/1970 (14.4 cm. by 24 cm.)

Scorpion/1970 (16.7 cm. by 14.1 cm.)





Green Octopus/1971 (22.7 cm. tondo)



Scales of Justice/1971 (28.9 cm. by 41.3 cm.)



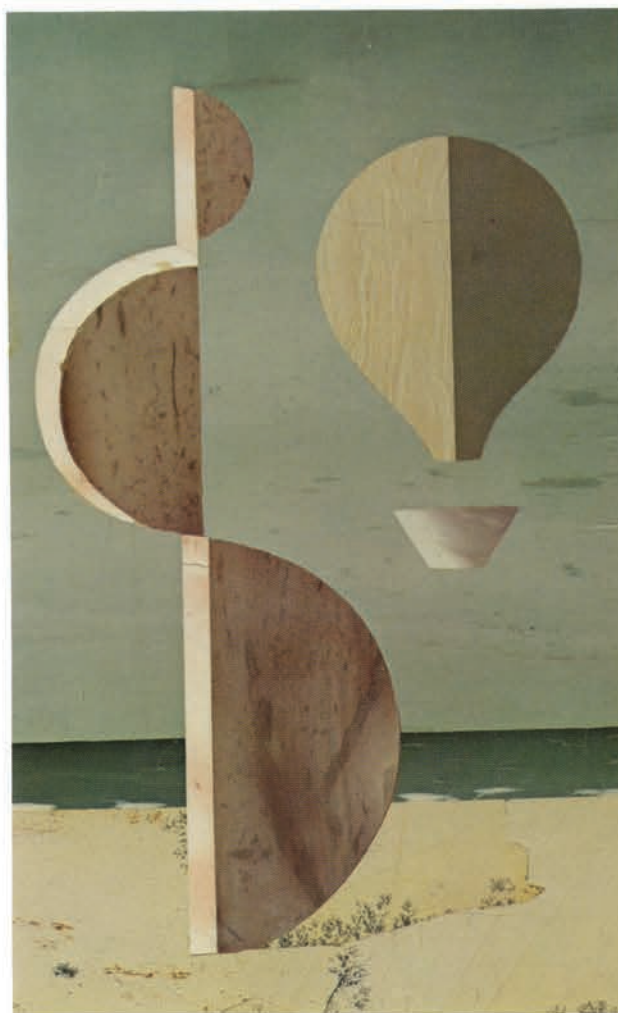
Four Fish/1971 (29.6 cm. by 33.3 cm.)



Three Butterflies/1971 (20 cm. by 17.8 cm.)



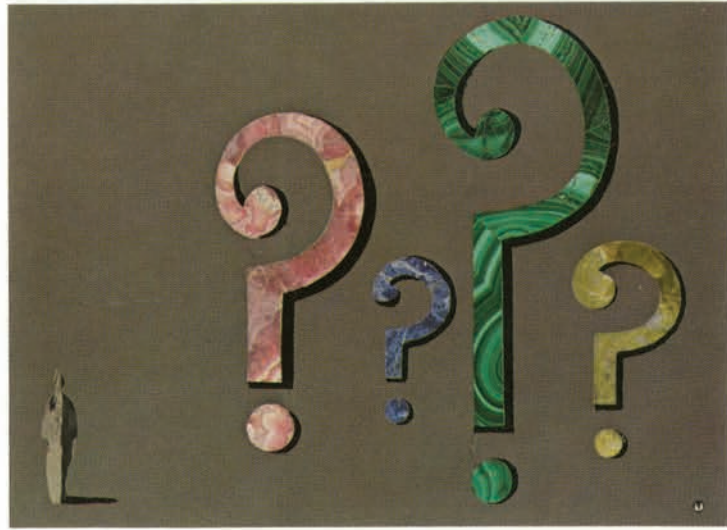
Question Man/1973 (19 cm. by 27.5 cm.)



Balloon/1973 (10 cm. by 15.7 cm.)



Goat/1973 (10 cm. by 15 cm.)



Question Marks/1973 (25.2 cm. by 18.4 cm.)

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