

## UNIT 2: THE ALEXANDER MOSAIC





## PREVIEW THE ARTWORK

**What is your first impression or emotional response to this artwork? (Consider mood, tone, or feeling before analyzing details)**

**What questions or ideas come to mind immediately? (About the subject, artist, or technique)**

**\*\*Watch the SmartHistory video linked in the assignment in the LMS\*\***

## LEARN ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

# THE ALEXANDER MOSAIC

*Artist: Unknown  
Year: c.100 BCE*

*Location: Originally from the House of the Faun in Pompeii*

Medium: Stone and glass tesserae (mosaic)

### Style: Hellenistic Naturalism

Imagine standing on the floor of a vast Roman mansion, the kind owned by a family with wealth, education, and a hunger for beauty. Light spills through the peristyle courtyard as guests gather for a banquet, and beneath their feet – without warning – history unfolds. Warriors surge forward. Horses scream and twist. The air seems to crackle with fear and courage. This is not merely decoration. This is a battlefield frozen in stone, a window into one of the most important clashes of the ancient world.

This enormous artwork (8 feet 11 inches high x 16 feet 9 inches long!!!), known as The Alexander Mosaic, was discovered in 1831 in Pompeii, preserved beneath volcanic ash after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. It dates to around 100 BCE and was crafted from more than 1.5 million tesserae – tiny stones shaped and arranged with precision. Although created by Roman artists, it is widely believed to be a copy of a renowned Hellenistic Greek painting that has since been lost. Thus, ironically, it is this Roman imitation that allows us to glimpse the greatness of Greek painting.

The scene presents a turning point in the long struggle between two civilizations: the forces of Alexander the Great, the young Macedonian king whose ambition burned hotter than any forge in the ancient world, and the armies of Darius III, ruler of the Persian Empire. Historians debate whether this mosaic depicts the Battle of Issus (333 BCE) or Gaugamela (331 BCE), but the moment is unmistakable: Alexander's charge has shattered the Persian

line. Darius, once confident at the head of the world's mightiest empire, turns to flee. His chariot wheels spin violently in retreat, his body twisted between pride and terror.

Study the **expressions** of the two kings.

Alexander rides without a helmet, without fear. His gaze is sharp, unblinking, locked on the Persian ruler like an arrow that cannot be recalled. Darius's eyes are wide, his arm stretching backward – not to strike, but as if pleading for the lives of his soldiers. **The artist has preserved here a human truth:** the moment of defeat is not always loud; sometimes it is the quiet collapse of confidence.

Look to the ground beneath them. Fallen soldiers, overturned shields, shattered spears. One Persian warrior sees his own reflection in his shield as he dies – perhaps the most haunting detail in the work. **The artist has hidden philosophy in plain sight:** *heroes and kings command the scene, but ordinary men pay the price.*

Even in the chaos, the artist exerts control through **line, shape, and composition**. Notice how the diagonal spears thrust forward behind Alexander, guiding your eyes to the center of conflict. See how the overlapping shapes – horses, limbs, shields – compress space, intensifying urgency and forcing the action toward us. Although much of the upper portion is empty, the lower half is dense with motion, weight, and consequence. **This imbalance draws attention** to what truly matters: the clash of willpower, the drama contained in the eyes of two rulers.

The horses themselves appear caught in the same moral tension as their riders – some leap forward into duty, others recoil in instinctive fear. The **tension** between courage and survival is written even in their anatomy. Through mosaic stone, we see movement, emotion, depth – proof of the astonishing naturalism that Greek artists achieved long before the Renaissance rediscovered such skill.

The mosaic's survival is its own miracle. The original painting is lost. Alexander's empire crumbled. The Persian Empire fell. Pompeii was buried. The Roman family who once walked upon this floor vanished into history. Yet this mosaic remains – silent, yet still speaking.

It speaks of ambition that cannot be satisfied. It speaks of the fragility of power.

It speaks of men whose choices reshaped the world. And it speaks of an artist who understood that the way a story is composed shapes the way it is remembered.

**As you study this artwork**, let your eyes travel the lines of the spears, the direction of movement, and the arrangement of figures. Reflect on the choices the artist made to elevate this moment not simply as a record of battle, but as a timeless meditation on leadership, fear, courage, and the cost of empire.

At the center of history stands a young king – determined, daring, unstoppable.

At the edge of defeat sits another – powerful, proud, now realizing that power can disappear in a single heartbeat.

This is the moment when the ancient world began to change.

And it all lies beneath your feet in a mosaic of tiny stones.

## OBSERVE THE ARTWORK

What is the **subject** (the main focus/story)?

A Single Person     Group of people     Landscape or Nature     Still Life  
 Scene: Scripture     Scene: History     Scene: Mythology/Legend     Other:

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What **message** or **purpose** does this artwork have?

Sacred / Religious     Secular / Non-Religious     Unknown / Unclear

How **realistic** is this artwork's style?

Very Realistic / Naturalistic     Stylized but still recognizable     Abstract / Non-Representational

## TECHNIQUE & DESIGN

What is the medium used in this piece of artwork?

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What do you observe about the **surface/technique**?

Smooth and Polished     Detailed and Precise     Textured or Layered  
 Energetic or Expressive     Repetitive or Patterned     Other:

What do you observe about **texture**?

Smooth Surface     Rough or Uneven Surface     A Mix of Textures

What do you observe about **line**?

Strong Outlines Around Shapes     Subtle/Blended Edges  
 Lines Create Movement or Direction     Lines Create Rhythm or Pattern

What do you observe about the **proportions**?

Natural / Realistic     Idealized  
(more perfect than real life)     Exaggerated or Distorted

## LIGHT & SPACE

Can you locate the light source in the artwork?

No       Yes      If yes, from where?

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What do you observe about the light?

Natural       Symbolic/Unrealistic       Studio Light       Direct Light/Harsh

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Is there a sense of movement?

Everything appears still & stable       A sense of motion (describe what suggests it):

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Is there a sense of depth?

Illusion of distance       flat/lacking depth

How did the artist suggest depth? (Overlap, scale, perspective, color, etc)

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## COLOR & SYMBOLISM

What hues do you see? (Check all that apply)

Red       Red-Orange       Orange       Yellow-Orange       Yellow       Yellow-Green  
 Green       Blue-Green       Blue       Blue-Violet       Violet       Red-Violet

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Where do these hues appear on the color wheel?

Complementary (opposite)       Analogous (side-by-side)       Warm       Cool

What saturations are used?

Bright/Intense       Pale       Darkened

Are there symbolic uses of color? Any meaning/purpose in the colors used? Explain.

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## INTERPRETATION & MEANING

What do you notice about the **gesture/positioning/gaze/placement** of the subject?

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What **story, idea or emotion** might the artist be communicating through this artwork?  
What story are they trying to tell you?

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How might someone in the original time and place have understood or appreciated this artwork differently than we do today?

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Does this work **remind you of another** artwork, story, or cultural symbol? Does it look like anything else you have observed in your studies or the world around you?

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## COMPOSITION SKETCH

Draw (only) the major shapes and composition in simplified shape form.



## \* KEY FACTS FOR MEMORIZATION \*

**TITLE:**

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**ARTIST:**

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**YEAR:**

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**LOCATION:**

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**MEDIUM:**

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**STYLE:**

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Sources consulted: National Archaeological Museum of Naples; House of the Faun excavation records; SmartHistory video "Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii"; Khan Academy Art History resources; scholarly summaries of the Alexander Mosaic and its Hellenistic Greek painting origins.