



SPECIALIST

THOMAS GREENAWAY

JAMES YORKE visits the workshop of the Northamptonshire craftsman who is helping to preserve the sixteenth-century Italian art of *pietra dura* – and bringing it to a new audience

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Translated from the Italian as ‘hard stone’, *pietra dura* is a decorative art where surfaces are inlaid with marble and semi-precious stones that have been precisely cut, carefully matched and highly polished. The Florentines, with whom the technique is closely associated, romantically referred to it as ‘painting in stone’, as the arrangements – on walls, floors, furniture and boxes – often depict scenes or patterns.

Having thrived from about 1550, this slow and laborious art became increasingly anachronistic by the twentieth century as mechanisation prevailed and the number of specialist artists dwindled. Into this rather gloomy scenario entered Thomas Greenaway, who was studying art history in Florence in 2004. His enthusiasm was set alight by *pietra dura* tables on display in the Pitti Palace. ‘It surprised me how people drifted past these tables not realising they were made from stone,’ he says. A year at the Chippendale International School of Furniture introduced him to marquetry techniques in wood and fuelled his desire to apply them to stones. On returning to Florence in 2006, a chance encounter with Roberto Marrucci, a leading *pietra dura* practitioner, resulted in a four-year traditional apprenticeship ‘working among a wonderful Florentine family without a modern tool in sight, forgetting I lived in the twenty-first century’.

In 2010, Thomas returned to England. ‘I was highly tempted to stay in Tuscany, but I wanted to develop my own ideas and produce my designs,’ he says. He set up his workshop, Greenaway Mosaics, in converted stables in rural Northamptonshire. Here he produces *pietra dura* panels, jewellery boxes, coffee tables and games tables for private clients, as well as Leicester and Westminster cathedrals.

In one room, shelves display reams of semi-precious stones and marbles, like paint on an artist’s palette. These include lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, jaspers and agates,

malachite and verde d’Arno, a greenish-yellow marble from Tuscany. The adjoining workshop is dominated by a routing machine and an electric polisher, which are used on large surfaces, such as tabletops and floors. A Heath Robinson-esque electric sawing machine stretches from the floor to the ceiling, with a garden drip feed supplying a constant flow of water to help slice larger stones. This is a handmade machine with a thin steel blade with no teeth on it, meaning there is less stone wastage when slicing very valuable pieces. ‘It can take several days just to cut a single slice,’ Thomas adds.

The smallest and most delicate pieces – sometimes just 1 or 2mm – are cut with a traditional archetto saw, a device fitted with wire and resembling an archer’s bow. While sawing, Thomas constantly applies to the wire a spatula smeared with silicon carbide mixed with water – a traditional Florentine way of providing the necessary friction to cut the stone. ‘The real skill is finding the right piece of stone with the right texture and shading,’ says Thomas. Cutting smaller stones with an archetto is agonisingly slow. An A4-size panel can take up to a month to complete; polishing it with a piece of agate takes a whole day.

In 2015, Thomas created the royal coat of arms from lapis lazuli, yellow chalcedony and Duke’s red limestone (mined from a now-closed quarry near Chatsworth) for Richard III’s tomb in Leicester Cathedral: a fitting memorial for the last Plantagenet king. An ongoing project is the conservation of an Italian tabletop dating from 1570 from Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire. It is heartening to see that, through Thomas’s work, *pietra dura* is not only helping to preserve historic creations, but also playing a role in twenty-first-century life. And if there is one thing his apprenticeship taught him, it is that patience is key □

Greenaway Mosaics: 01327-861378; greenawaymosaics.com



THIS PAGE FROM TOP Thomas in his studio. A butterfly panel polished with agate stone and silicon carbide abrasive grit. Restoring a nineteenth-century Florentine tabletop (also opposite top right). OPPOSITE Thomas creates plaques depicting creatures such as an owl, parrot, koi carp, tree frog and lapwing using colourful stones, including malachite from Congo (middle right). Small stones are cut with an archetto (centre)

