



# Preliminary sketch for Mosaic Relief I

John Ernest

---

**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Preliminary sketch for Mosaic Relief I

**Artist/Maker:** John Ernest

**Born:** 1960

**Object Type:** Drawing

**Materials:** Paint, Paper, Pencil

**Technique:** Drawing

**Accession Number:** 31627

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe

**Credit Line:** Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

---

This preliminary sketch relates to *Mosaic Relief I*, the first of at least seven reliefs in a series that John Ernest began in 1960, using the square and the right-angle isosceles triangle as basic units. [1] The sketch shows the rigid grid system Ernest adopted to limit the possibilities that could be achieved using these units. Within these self-imposed restrictions, he introduced variations of colour, shape, relief and surface, which are documented in the annotations on this sketch. For example, the numbers on the individual triangular elements indicate the different depths used for the relief. The composition of two interlocking rotated squares corresponds with the final version of *Mosaic Relief I*, however, Ernest did not use the same distribution of bright colours that he experimented with in this preliminary sketch. [2]

Ernest was committed to exploring the potential of non-figurative art and was part of an informal network of artists associated with British Constructivism. He was fascinated by parallels between the rules of geometry and the new ways that artists were engaging with abstract spatial relationships. Writing in 1961 about his interest in mathematical concepts and systems, he described 'trying to achieve some of the beauty of a formal mathematical system in a visual experience'. [3]

The Mosaic Relief series was closely related to this process, as Ernest described in a letter to the Tate Gallery in 1967:

'The mosaic relief form grew directly out of my interest in devising visual analogies for abstract or conceptual structures - usually mathematical. In 1959 I discovered a method for portraying "Group" tables on which I based a number of maquettes. In these the visual structure corresponded precisely with particular mathematical structures. Later I rejected these objects (which were lost or destroyed) because of views I held at the time as to the relations between art works and models. Nevertheless Mosaic 1 grew directly from secondary attributes of these analogues. The two principle ideas involved in No1, as well as the others in the series are:

1: The limitations of choice imposed by the restriction to a fixed number of possibilities within a grid system.

2: The evocation of a hierarchy of appearances within such a severely restrictive system. The visual elements are grouped or clustered to allow for the formation of alternative assemblages. Qualities such as colour, shape, relief, surface quality, etc., accumulate variously to make different wholes. Ideally the visual structures are unpeeled one from another by shifts in the focus on the spectator's attention.' [4]

Michael Morris purchased *Preliminary sketch for Mosaic Relief I* in 1996.

Lisa Newby, June 2021

[1]Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.195-204. See p.203 for illustrations of the Mosaic Relief series.

[2] For an image of *Mosaic Relief I* on display in the exhibition *British Constructivist Art in 1961-2*, see [British Constructivist Art | Issue 3 - July 2016 | Issues | British Art Studies](#)

[3]John Ernest, 'Some Thoughts on Mathematics', *Structure*, Third Series, No.2, 1961, pp.48-53, p.49.

[4]Letter from John Ernest, 20 March 1967, published in *The Tate Gallery Report* (London: Tate Gallery, 1967), p.25-6.

---

## Exhibitions

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

---

## Further Reading

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.195-204.

---

## Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.

---