

# MOSAIC, GOLD, AND FRILLY SKIRTS: MIRKA MORA'S LEGACY IN MELBOURNE

Sabine Cotte

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*French born Mirka Mora (1928-2018) had a particular status in Melbourne: a beloved artist, forever celebrated for her Parisian accent and the epitome of bohemia, she has left many public artworks in the city, populated with her characteristic imagery of children, fantastic creatures and flowery plants. Her public image, her original sense of dress and her eccentric behaviour are as famous, if not more, than her art. Mora's unique place in the city's social and artistic circles has much to do with her European migrant status, her central role in Melbourne's artistic world since the 1950s, together with her important production of public works that have become city landmarks,<sup>1</sup> and her extensive public engagement through workshops, classes and artist talks. However, if material culture was her bedrock to create a powerful image that made her stand out as a woman artist in a male dominated industry, she also cleverly used her materials and techniques to create artworks that impress by a complex approach of tradition and symbols. Although she embraced a large number of techniques during her career – spanning more than six decades – this essay will focus on her public artworks, and examine the broader implications of her material choices and practices.*

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## FROM PARIS TO MELBOURNE: SEAMSTRESS, ARTIST, RESTAURATEUR, WOMAN

Born in Paris to a Lithuanian father and a Romanian mother, Mora enjoyed a childhood immersed in art, mainly thanks to her art dealer father who collected all sorts of antiques and displayed them at home. Because of her Jewish background, Mora's life and her education were disrupted in 1942, when she was deported with her family to a camp on the outskirts of Paris, from which they were saved by her father. After the war, she trained in drama for two years in Paris,<sup>2</sup> and married at the age of nineteen. At twenty-two, she immigrated to Australia with her husband Georges Mora and their baby son Philippe. Mora, then aged 23, started to make a living as a seamstress, in parallel

<sup>1</sup> Murals in Flinders Street Station, Melbourne; Tolarno murals, St Kilda; Acland Street Readings bookshop, St Kilda; mosaic in St Kilda Pier, St Kilda; Dog's Bar mural, St Kilda.

<sup>2</sup> Education par le Jeu et l'Art Dramatique, Paris, 1946. Created by Jean Vilar, Jean Louis Barrault, Roger Blin among others, its aim was to lead students to self control for their personal creation (from *Pratiques théâtrales dans l'éducation en France au XXe siècle: Aliénation ou émancipation?* - Études littéraires; Artois Presse Université, 2010).

to developing an artistic practice. She had always made her own clothes and was 'a marvellous dressmaker, very exclusive, very tasteful dressmaking and embroidery' according to John Yule (Irving 1989, 118). This talent in textile work was later sublimated in Mora's embroideries and soft sculptures, which combined very detailed textile work with various techniques of painting.

This sewing business and related encounters with clients became Mora's entree to the artistic society of Melbourne (Delany 1999). The Mora couple had briefly settled in a house in the suburb of McKinnon upon their arrival, only to realise that they hated it and had no interest in maintaining a garden. They actively looked for an artist's studio in the city centre; the landlord of the studio in Grosvenor Chambers, 9 Collins Street, was persuaded into leasing it to the couple after Mora told him that she was going to open a French 'haute couture studio' (Mora 1984). The studio became 'a legendary place' for the following 15 years, with Mirka as a 'queen bee figure, a catalyst figure of the 1950s' (Barbara Blackman in Mora 1984) and a centre for Melbourne's contemporary art and artists (Thomas 1993; Harding & Morgan 2015). Mora met Charles and Barbara Blackman through a customer who was interested in the decorated fur and lace collars she exhibited in the window, and who happened to be a friend of the couple (Mora 1965). She then offered her studio as a venue for an exhibition of Charles's schoolgirls, which opened on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1953. According to Harding & Morgan, 'the repurposing of the Moras' apartment as a gallery was to revolutionise the Melbourne art scene of the 1950s' (2015, 228). It also signalled the Mora couple's non-conformism to the Australian dwelling norms of the time that favoured low density suburbia; the couple's choice to live as a family in an artist's studio in the city centre was 'an assertion of its 'European-ness' and an attempt to bring a touch of its social and cultural values to Melbourne', a trait shared by many European immigrants of the time (O'Hanlon 2014).

It was readily embraced by the circle of artists; Barbara Blackman has spoken eloquently of their role in her essay 'The Good Ship Mora: Melbourne in the Fifties', published in *Meanjin* in 1996:

There we were, in Melbourne in the fifties, the new wave of painters [...] needing [...] some ship in which to sail, a destination of intent. Europe gave it to us; movers of the new force [...] Georges and Mirka Mora came from the heart of that war-wounded Europe, which we, in our protected isolation, were only slowly coming to understand. [...] Georges and Mirka offered us new sites. They were happeners, not owners. They had lost families, homes, land of birth, friendships,

memorabilia of their youths, and now lived in the present and its possibilities [...] certainly [Georges] grew us up, as assuredly as Mirka never let us escape our child hearted spontaneity (Blackman 1996, 294–5).

Melbourne society was still very conservative at the time and Mora's unique style of dress, discussed further, was something new, as was the open attitude of the couple that intimately mixed art and personal life. Most of the artists who later became important figures in the art world used to drop in at 9 Collins Street to talk, view the gallery's shows or do some drawings while conversing.<sup>3</sup> Arthur Boyd (1920-1999) Fred Williams (1927-1982), John Perceval (1923-2000), Erica McGilchrist (1926-2014), Ian Sime (1926-1989) and Charles Blackman (1928-2018) were habitués. Both Barbara Blackman and Mora recalled how intense the relationships were between these people, how much they learned from each other, from constantly visiting and writing to each other (Mora 1984). For Mora, it was a period of intense learning from her many contacts with other artists. 'I had an art school around me' is how she remembers those times (Mora 1984), which highlights how much she learned by watching other artists paint or draw in her studio. According to her, at the time [in 1954] she 'could not draw properly and did not understand paint physically', and was struggling to develop a self-taught practice, while bringing up children and cooking for the flocks of visitors (Mora 1984).

But the most important encounter occurred through meeting the music critic John Sinclair, during a party at the house of one of Mora's customers. Sinclair was a friend of John and Sunday Reed, and directed Sunday to the young French seamstress, which triggered a friendship between both couples. That friendship was to have a great impact on Mora's career and on Melbourne's art scene for the following decades.

The Mora couple would become a feature in the Melbourne arts and culinary scene of the time. While actively contributing to the revival of the Contemporary Artists Society (CAS) and the creation of a dynamic artistic culture in Melbourne, alongside arts patrons John and Sunday Reed,<sup>4</sup> Georges and Mirka Mora had two other sons and ran successively three cafes and

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<sup>3</sup> Barrett Reid describes the group as 'a fairly close knit group of people, based on personality rather than necessarily talent as such or shared ideas' (Irving 1989, p 93)

<sup>4</sup> Georges Mora and John Reed established the first Museum of Modern Art and Design of Australia in 1958. It operated until 1966 when it closed due to lack of funding. The Reeds later donated their house and their collection to the state to establish Heide Museum of Modern Art which opened in 1981, just before their death in December the same year.

restaurants that became meeting points for the local art world (Heathcote 1995). The first one was Mirka café, which opened at 183 Exhibition Street on 8 December 1954, with crockery by John Perceval and art on the wall lent by the Reeds. Among the several pubs that served as gathering places for the avant-garde, Mirka café was ‘a place for Melbourne’s biggest creative egos’ (Heathcote 1995, 66), ‘the hangout for Melbourne’s most avant-garde artists’, where the weightier conversations happened, and the only place where women were not marginalised (Thomas 1993). The café’s exhibitions, including group and solo presentations such as Joy Hester’s show in 1955, helped enhance the Moras’ status as innovative patrons of the arts (Clark 1997).

Becoming too small, Mirka café gave way in 1956 to the Balzac French restaurant in 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne. In addition to its reputation for good food and stimulating company, it soon became a great meeting place for the art and political world, particularly after gaining its license for serving alcohol in April 1958 (Clark 1997, 176). Charles Blackman was a cook for a while; being close to the Melbourne Cricket Ground, the Balzac was one of the busiest restaurants during the Olympic Games in November 1956. Blackman often recorded the frenzy of the day with drawings of flying crockery that inspired his famous Alice in Wonderland series (Harding & Morgan 2018, 111). The Moras’ restaurants were indeed much more than a means of living; Mirka and Georges held a privileged point of observation, overseeing the incredibly rich encounters that happened daily and fostered long lasting friendships with artists from various parts of the world.<sup>5</sup>To decorate the restaurant, the Moras commissioned six ceramic angels to John Perceval (some of which now in public collections), and a large triptych to three Sydney artists: the ‘Annandale Imitation Realists’ (Colin ‘Countdown’ Lanceley, Mike ‘Pancho’Brown and Ross ‘Pride of Day’ Crothall) in exchange for meals and accommodation.<sup>6</sup> The painting is now in Queensland Art Gallery. Mirka contributed to the decoration with a black and white mural, recently rediscovered during renovation in the restaurant.

When the building at 9 Collins Street was listed for demolition in 1965 (only the façade is preserved today), Georges Mora bought the Tolarno hotel in St Kilda, where he could have in the same place a restaurant, a studio for Mirka and a home for his family. Three years later it also became an art gallery (Clark 1997). Over the years, Mora gradually painted all the walls of the restaurant and

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<sup>5</sup> Foreign artists were often invited to open the CAS’ annual exhibition, as did British actor Ralph Richardson in 1955 or American musician Larry Adler in 1957 (Clark 1997, 176).

<sup>6</sup> <https://aiccm.org.au/cleaning-café-balzac-mural>

the ground floor, to create a mural ensemble<sup>7</sup> that was registered by Heritage Victoria in 2009. For Georges, it was also the starting point of his career as an art dealer, which was to become his main job in the years to come. The Tolarno French Bistro replaced the Balzac as a meeting point for the art world (Thomas 1993) and its murals became an intrinsic part of the place:

Tolarno gallery was a phenomenon of the 1960s. Georges and his first wife, the artist Mirka Mora, had taken over an old hotel... they turned it into one of Melbourne's liveliest bistros. Mirka decorated every surface with her angels and lovers, stray children and magical birds and beasts (McCaughey 2003, 79).

After a few years at Tolarno, the Mora couple eventually separated in 1970 and pursued their respective careers as an art dealer (Georges) and an artist (Mirka).

From the 1970s, murals became a big part of Mora's production, either public works of art (Ayr mural, Flinders Street mural, St Kilda mosaic) or adorning private residences. Most of these murals are still in place and have become landmarks of their respective areas. But the most striking characteristic is the variety of techniques they employ: mosaic, painting on wall, on canvas, on plastic, carved and painted relief. In addition to her mural production, Mora was also working tirelessly in her studio, producing charcoal drawings, oil and tempera paintings, theatre masks and costumes, painted soft sculptures and painted embroideries. This article shows how this vast array of techniques enlightens the importance of materials in Mora's art and her links to art history.

Mora continued to paint daily in her home-studio in Melbourne almost until her death in 2018 at the age of ninety. Cherished by the media for her bohemian personality, she regularly featured in Melbourne's media – on radio, television and newspapers. She appears in *The Age* over the years for exhibition reviews, in social pages and social rubrics such as 'What I learnt' (2003) or 'Life lessons' (2011), as well as for a celebration of significant events of her life; *The Argus*, *The Herald*, *The Sun* (and later *the Herald Sun*), *The Australian* all published portraits, usually at the time of her exhibitions. But she was also an inimitable 'Agony Aunt' for ABC television in 2012, a lively guest of 'Enough Rope with Andrew Denton' in 2009, as well as 'George Negus tonight' in 2004 – where she kindly advised him that to be a true bohemian, you should not have money in the

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<sup>7</sup> The murals that cover the four walls of the restaurant were 'refreshed' by Mora herself in 2007 when the restaurant was revamped by chef Guy Grossi and renamed 'Mirka at Tolarno'. Other artworks include plaster bas reliefs and signs in the bathrooms.

bank, the key being to spend it (Mora 2004). She also participated in projects of social activism, embracing public causes in her neighbourhood's local life, where her presence always attracted public notice,<sup>8</sup> or donating drawings to local causes such as promoting the neighbourhood of St Kilda or fundraising for the French School of Melbourne. On a broader historic perspective, she was interviewed for the National Library of Australia's *Oral History Program* (1965,1984,1987,2012), participated in the National Trust's 'Our City Stories' in 2013, and shared her traumatic past in an audio-visual series on Jewish survivors of Nazi camps produced by Yad Vashem, the World's Holocaust Remembrance Centre (Mora 2012). Her autobiography *Wicked but virtuous, my life*, was published by Penguin in 2000, followed three years later by *Love and Clutter*, a charming book of drawings, photographs and stories about her objects.

This rich and multi-faceted life made her a very important character in Melbourne's history, recognised by institutions and community alike: she was made an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government in 2002,<sup>9</sup> and selected as one of Victoria's twenty-five 'living treasures' by the *Herald Sun* (4 October 2014), alongside other artists, arts patrons, and sports and media personalities.

#### READING THROUGH MATERIALS

Because her education was interrupted, Mora spent her life immersed in books for her own education. Her first reflex when starting a new technical exploration was to buy illustrated books so she could study from text and images alike. She did so for needlework as well as for mosaic, both techniques that require very specific knowledge. To get a good understanding of mosaic for the Flinders Street mural, her bible was the monumental text *The mosaics of San Marco in Venice* by Otto Demus, published in 1984 by University of Chicago Press, and other books on the sixth century Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna (Mora 2013; Reid 1986). While she researched the literature, the scope of her study was broader than purely technical, including iconography, Greek mythology, philosophy, medieval imagery, decorative art, the history of arts and crafts, aboriginal art and various world folklores.

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<sup>8</sup> Melbourne icon Mirka Mora rejects the development plan proposed for the St Kilda Triangle site, video, 6 February 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeLME2uicLk>.

<sup>9</sup> L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Order of the Arts and the Letters) was created in 1957 by the French Ministry of Culture. It rewards persons who significantly contributed to the enrichment of the French cultural inheritance. It has three grades, in increasing order; Chevalier (knight), Officier (Officer) and Commandeur (Commander).

She then integrated this knowledge in her work, technically and stylistically. Careful observation of the mural shows how she applied it, for example including glass tiles specifically imported from Italy, that let the light through before reflecting it, creating an illusion of depth. She also used them for sinuous golden outlines inspired by the San Marco artists' golden backgrounds and linear wavy seas. Her diary of the time reflected her constant reference to these books: 'Back to San Marco and Ravenna' (7 January 1986); 'Draw and watercolour. Also look at mosaic books O. Demus and Ravenna yet again' (18 January 1986).

While some artistic movements in the second half of the twentieth century (such as Arte Povera and Conceptualism) would reject or entirely deconstruct traditional academic knowledge to define themselves in new perspectives, Mora craved a place in the centuries-long tradition of art, and actively used technical knowledge to reach her goal. A confident relationship with materials was for her a clear indicator of artistic status; when asked what prompted her to choose plaster for one of her bas-reliefs [at Tolarno hotel in 1977], she summed it up by this self-explanatory statement: 'all great sculptors have worked with plaster!' (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 13 January).

For her, the concept of knowledge was embodied by materials and technique. But Mora's intimate relationship with the techniques of the Old Masters did not take over her art. Rather, she used it as a way of anchoring her practice in a solid base, a starting point from which to explore creation freely. She appropriated and creatively revisited each technique to elaborate her own hybrid processes, where symbolic meaning is often present. In her art therefore, the materials communicate significance to the work, sometimes through themselves and the ways they are assembled and transformed, sometimes through the artist's way of staging them on her body and her environment, or through the sharing of her processes.

The story of the making of the mosaic on the Flinders Street mural (1986) well illustrates Mora's process of customisation. For all its beauty, mosaic is a very difficult and constraining technique because of the sharpness, linear edges and non-flexibility of the ceramic or glass tesserae, and the fact that the mortar hardens quickly, blocking them in a fixed position once set. She loved the majesty and stunning visual effect offered by mosaic, and was obviously very eager to learn the technique, as her thorough research demonstrated. On the other hand, she was equally eager to 'bend' the method to suit her own desires. For her, the traditional technique of mosaic was a sort of 'passport' to

the domain of art history and a guarantee of the longevity of the work of art – and her name as an artist – through time. Her modifications to the tradition were subtle, but significant enough to convey her identifiable personality.

Traditional techniques of mosaic, described for instance in Ralph Mayer's *The artist's handbook of materials and techniques* (4<sup>th</sup> edition 1981) often involve preparing the work separately on a flexible support, and transferring it on the wall prior to applying the mortar that will seal the tiles together, this being called the indirect method. Mora was aware of this technique, and of the fact that she did not conform to it, for she told Barbara Blackman that the mural was 'not prepared as traditional mosaists do, flat in another room and then put on the wall' (Mora 1984). She chose to employ the traditional way of drawing in dark red on the wall prior to the application of the mosaic, as confirmed by her assistant (McGaan 2014, pers.comm., 25 September) and by photographs of the mural in progress. After this, she worked directly on the wall. But even then, she did not follow the other traditional method, where the tiles are glued on the wall and the mortar placed afterwards as a grout; instead, she worked by laying a surface of mortar and pushing the tiles inside it, positioning them at different angles instead of evenly, thus creating an undulating surface, with tesserae of all sizes and shapes catching the light and shimmering in it. She insisted that she did not want flat surfaces because they were 'dead'; observing the mural near sunset when the light comes from its side shows she succeeded in her quest; at this time of the day, the artwork is almost coming to life.

These subtle technical innovations contributed to her signature style as much as her personal iconography. However, mosaic was not the only classical technique employed by Mora. During the 1960s, she explored tempera, a technique dating back to the fourteenth century Italian painters, that had been revived in the twentieth century and described in treatises such as Jacques Maroger's *The secrets of the Old Masters* (1948), which provided several recipes for tempera emulsions, to be mixed with oil painting in order to emulate the texture of ancient paintings. Charles Blackman, a good friend of Mora, was also interested in this book and experimented with tempera in the 1950s and 1960s, notably in the *Alice* series (Mora 1984). Tempera is characterised by the use of egg as a binder for the pigments. However, Mora's idea of tempera was different: it involved egg, water and pigments, but also flour. Her 'dough drawings' as she called them, were inspired by the Old Masters recipes, with the difference that the egg was not mixed with the pigments and applied to the surface with a brush, but mixed with the flour to create a moist dough that was then dipped into dry pigments and used to draw on paper, giving an effect



similar to pastel drawing. Mora detailed the process during our conversations, underlining her link to the Old Masters ('the Old Masters worked with eggs, do you remember? well, I work with dough that is moist by the eggs') in contrast to her own personal interpretation and showing her pride in both the technique and the results: 'it was very soft, very beautiful, like pastel, it was very beautiful' (Mora 2013a). The technique was unusual and became the topic of a 1967 article in *the Herald* "The girl who daubs in dough', where she proudly stated that because of the eggs, her paintings would last forever – another claim to be included in history.

In the seventies, after separating from her husband, Mora developed her soft sculpture technique (fabric sculptures stuffed, coated and painted), shown in many exhibitions, and started to teach at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) for a living. In addition to the workshops, her artistic activity through these years was very intense, involving experimentation with various media (fabric, ink drawings, paintings, embroideries, charcoals, tempera, mosaic), which attests to her 'exceptional facility for technical exploration' (Morgan 2010, 29). Gradually emerging as a recognised artist, Mora started to get public commissions; she was the first of a series of fourteen artists commissioned to paint trams by the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of the Arts of Victoria in 1978<sup>10</sup> (Fagan 1987; Auld 2001), a project that sought to bring art to the streets for everyone's enjoyment, providing access to art for people who did not usually go to galleries. The columnist Phillip Adams famously described the Art trams project by declaring 'Melbourne has invented the mobile mural, the electric fresco!'.<sup>11</sup> Mora's tram, one of the people's favourites, ran for a number of years in the streets of Melbourne before being auctioned in 1986 (Fagan 1987) to a private collection.

Mora was deeply involved in the community arts projects of the 1970s; besides her workshops, she took part in 1978 in the 'Artists in schools' pilot project funded by the Australia Council's Community Arts Board (Auld 2001), spending one day a week in a designated school for an entire term. Mora worked in both Ste Anne Catholic School in Kew and in Kew Primary School (Mora 1984), creating artworks with the children. The same year, an exhibition of her painted embroideries toured regional Victoria, as well as two boxes of dolls commissioned by the Crafts Board Australia, representing *The enchanted*

<sup>10</sup> Other artists included Erica Mc Gilchrist, Clifton Pugh, Les Kossatz, Peter Corrigan, Gareth Samson, Howard Arkley, Andrew Southall, Don Laycock, Mike Brown, Paul Mason, Trevor Nicholls, Rosemary Ryan.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in the leaflet "Melbourne Painted Trams", published in 1986 by the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry for the Arts, Victoria.

*garden* and the aboriginal *Bunyip paradise* now held in the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra.<sup>12</sup>

Even in her textile explorations, Mora anchored her practice into the tradition: for her embroideries, she revisited the quilting technique of ‘trapunto’, originating from fourteenth century Italy and characterised by monochrome three-dimensional quilts, where some parts of the work are raised by stuffing them; as usual, she re-interpreted it, painting the raised parts, mixing paint and stitches of all sorts, some traditional, some invented. All the while, she drew inspiration from a very big book, *Needlework through the ages*, by Symonds and Preece, which contains many black and white photographs of historic needlework and chapters such as ‘Origin of stitches and materials’ that she studied closely and whose roots can be traced in her needlework (Mora 2013b and personal observations).

Mora’s approach could be described as a ‘classic technique with a twist’. She viewed traditional ways of making art as solid bases indispensable to creation, but believed that these time-honoured practices should never hamper the creative process. Her innovations, however, never strayed far enough from the conventional technique to make the works unstable. Furthermore, as she sought to gain recognition within the artistic pantheon through the use of these techniques, she made sure to keep them identifiable at a glance. Only with closer scrutiny can people realize the myriad tiny adjustments that she has added in order to completely appropriate the method and make it part of her own artistic identity.

#### THE PRICE AND SYMBOLISM OF MATERIALS

Good materials had particular significance for Mora; to her, they were a precondition to the production of quality art. Books, embroidery supplies, paints or mosaic tiles had a common point, their high quality; the more expensive they were, the more quality was warranted, as when she chose tiles imported from Italy for the Flinders Street mosaic, stating that she ‘wanted the best’. ‘Manganese blue was very expensive but I know the effect’ (Mora 1984). Excellent materials generally allow for easier use, better quality of colours, better flow of paint or better capacity for modelling and ultimately more beautiful results. Boasting ‘when I buy paints I don’t want to know how much

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<sup>12</sup> The *Boxes of mysteries* are two Perspex cases with decorated bases, dimensions 141x60x70 cm. (Assemblage, cotton, filling, coloured paint); *The enchanted garden* comprises 55 dolls, *The Bunyip Paradise* 25 dolls (online catalogue of the National Gallery of Australia, <http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/mirkamora>)

it costs. They are mine to work with' (Mora 1984), Mora arguably rewarded herself by indulging in expensive materials that openly represented the artistic and social status she considered to be hers.

This choice reflected her desire to ensure the longevity of her productions. She also exploited cleverly their symbolic charge, well informed by her scholarly readings. Her use of gold is particularly telling; amongst all symbols carried by colours, gold has the greatest power of evocation and meanings, in addition to its stunning visual quality. Gold is a symbol of eternity, perfection, and has connotations of transcendence derived from the alchemy and its legend of transmutation of vulgar metals into gold. Gold and silver are also symbols of affluence and richness. These two colours were aesthetic choices, but their symbolic connotations also infused Mora's works with significance. She used them in selected works: tapestries, masks, and mosaics, revealing her layered intent. Flinders Street mosaic, located in the heart of Melbourne city, is a very prominent work, for which Mora was the laureate of the competition in 1986, over five other (male) artists. She derived great pride from this, and it was a turning point in her career. Therefore, she opted for a technique that would ensure that her work made a lasting impression; mosaic is historically considered as an indicator of wealth and prestige, because it is a time-consuming and expensive process, and survives mainly in imperial and high status religious buildings (James 2006), carrying meanings linked to permanence, grandeur, lavishness and commemoration (Lloyd and Inglis 2009). She reinforced the message by using magnificent Venetian glass tesserae with resplendent colours, including the gold and silver tiles. Mora was fully aware of the symbolic meaning of her choice, telling Ulli Beier in 1980 'Gold is life...to me gold does not signify physical but spiritual wealth' (Beier 1980). Combining the symbolic aspect of the materials with the inherent visual shine and weightiness of the mosaic, Mora's highly publicised use of the pricy tesserae shows her intention to impress with the Flinders Street mural; it had to evoke monumentality, resplendence and eternity, and the reviews show that it fully succeeded in that endeavour (Ryan 1986; Reid 1987).

Similarly, she used gold selectively in her masks for Euripides *Medea* staged by Playbox in 1979. Of all the painted masks, only *Medea's* is decorated with gold, as she is the only non-human character in the play. On stage, the mask of *Medea*, a character tormented and always in movement, would have caught the light in many different places, creating an extraordinary shimmering effect, and thus visually embodying *Medea's* powers as a magician. The Messenger, a character carrying news between the mythological beings fighting each other,

wore an elaborate headpiece decorated with silver patterns. Silver is one of the three base metals of alchemy and traditionally symbolises the moon energy and its serenity; mercury, an element characterised by swift movement, shares the same colour, hence the name 'quicksilver' given to the material mercury in the Middle Ages. The God Mercury is also the messenger of the Gods in Greek mythology, and wears characteristic winged sandals. Mixing these references together, Mora embellished the top of her unnamed Messenger's mask with wings (an echo of the winged sandals?) and decorated it with silver, black and blue, symbolically referring to his swiftness through the use of colour, while choosing a different and colder harmony than for the mask of Medea. It is clear that Mora, who was fully versed in Greek mythology, used these colours not solely for their chromatic qualities but also for their symbolic significance, particularly relevant to the divine characters in the play.

In many realisations of lesser importance, Mora equally showed a will to make the work more precious by adding 'noble' and expensive materials: she used expensive oil colours on the Ayr mural (QLD); she included sequins and beads on embroideries; she painted her stuffed sculptures with shiny oil paint; she designed golden 'frames' with paint or with mosaic in her oil paintings. For Mora, spending money on materials -and showing it- was a public celebration of the act of making art, which was often accompanied by the artist spending money on herself. For example, she decided to stay in an expensive hotel (the Windsor Hotel in Melbourne) for three nights to prepare drawings for the Flinders Street competition (Mora 2000). Other examples exist of the artist's use of costly materials being paralleled by personal luxuries in her private life, such as buying expensive hand creams and perfumes to alleviate the roughness of the mosaic job (Mora 1984), or treating herself and her assistant to expensive food and wine in nice restaurants after spending long hours each day on a public commission (McGaan 2014, pers. comm., 25 September). This took on an element of personal myth-making: by publicizing her 'extravagant' spending, on her art and on herself, when on a large project, Mora arguably was building her self-worth.

Her efforts did not stop with the realisation of the work, as she communicated about her research in every media interview, underlining her techniques' classical roots and cultural references. In this way, she was compensating her lack of formal artistic education, adding a legitimacy to her work that contributed to her recognition within the broader artistic tradition.

But beyond her public promotion, which was mainly confined to the realm of Melbourne's artistic society, the message can be read in the works' materiality. They transmit it through the complex texture of their surface, an experience both visual and tactile which often implies lengthy and difficult processes representing real physical challenges. The manner in which Mora, as an artist and as a woman, negotiated her bodily engagement with artistic achievements at all stages of her life, is the subject of the next section.

## **MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE ARTIST'S IMAGE**

### *Women artists*

The role of women in Melbourne's art scene in the 1950s and 1960s is not easy to grasp, due to their lack of visibility. Although they had gained social status during the war by accomplishing men's work in their absence, dominant ideologies of domesticity, family and material values were reinforced upon women with the return of peace, leaving little place for their emancipation (Burke 1975; Sheridan 2002). Peers describes a period of relative invisibility in the post-war years, centred on towering masculine figures such as Nolan, Tucker and Boyd' (Peers 2011, 16). In Melbourne, the prominent art teacher Max Meldrum had declared in 1938 that 'there would never be a great woman artist and there never had been' (Renschler 2006, 122). His opinion still had currency in the 1950s and the general culture was mainly hostile – or at best indifferent – to women artists.

Even in Mora's avant-garde artistic circle, the male-oriented order of things was not much contested. Reminiscing of the CAS activities, Mora and Barbara Blackman referred to its 'second circle of the wives' while Ailsa O'Connor, a member of the CAS in the late 1940s, recalled the 'slightly invisible women members' in the artists' groups (Mora 1984). Noting the large and mainly ignored existence of women in the post-war art world, Furby (2001) points to the CAS' internal contradictions between its manifestos and principles, and its consistent gender bias in favour of its male members, both in selecting works and in promoting artists. Deborah Hart concludes that 'despite a democratic and broadly inclusive approach to exhibitions in the CAS, the role of women in public debate was marginalised' (Hart 2001, 28).

As a result, there was a complete lack of contemporary role models for Mora, apart from Joy Hester, who however was largely unsuccessful compared to her husband Albert Tucker. Hester's choice of medium (ink drawing and watercolours, then viewed as less 'noble' than oil paint) probably also

contributed to her lack of recognition (Burke 1983). The two women were friends for a while, and Hester strongly encouraged Mora to practise her art, telling her that she should do 'hundreds of drawings and washes' (Hart 2001), advice that Mora followed by drawing intensively every day (Mora 1984).

Mora did not wish to be active in the feminist movement, stating that 'once a woman does this sort of thing [women's lib] she is losing her charm' (Dunstan 1971). Despite this personal non-political stance, she epitomized freedom for a woman, quietly making the choices that suited her best without needing political resonance. She was very much an actor of the times in her choice of textile materials. Art historian Whitney Chadwick has argued that materials play an important role in the perception of women's contribution to art as marginal (Chadwick 1994). For her, textile materials are emblematic of women's different perspective on art, challenging hitherto admitted supremacies which materially encode gendered identity within art history. Embroidery for example became over the centuries the uncontested embodiment of a specific ideology of femininity, which included social attitudes expected of women, and a symbol of the separation between arts and crafts (Parker & Pollock 1981, 59), thus linking gender, place of production and value. This indelible association of feminine identity with textile crafts, which has continued in the twentieth century, is often perceived as detrimental to an artist's image, as noted by Parker and Pollock (1981, 78). Very recently, the exhibition *Pathmakers* at Museum of Art and Design, New York explicitly linked the material choices made by women to the fact that they were often overlooked by the critics (Museum of Art and Design 2015).

While not delivering explicitly political messages with her textile creations, unlike her contemporaries Miriam Shapiro or Judy Chicago, whose famous 'Dinner party' was made in the same years, Mora nevertheless participated through her media and her attitude with art to the general movement that aimed to 'de-sacralise' art. Tellingly, Shapiro defined 'femme', a conflation of textile art and painting, with criteria such as including drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work, including scraps as essential to the process, having a woman-life context or having elements of covert imagery (Brooklyn Art Museum 2014), which fits quite well Mora's artistic production.

Mora however never had any interest in theorizing her art. She combined these 'feminine' techniques with painting and sculpture and transformed them into the sophisticated and very personal form of art that has become one of her trademarks. The thread and needle, far from confining her socially to the

domestic sphere that she had rejected in favour of creative freedom, provided Mora with exactly the opposite. Her textiles gave her the means of succeeding as a single woman, through her sales of embroideries and soft sculptures and her workshops, and strongly contributed to the construction of her artistic identity. This was also made possible by Mora's family and social network, comprising of her ex-husband Georges, founder of Tolarno galleries, and of Marianne Baillieu, director of Realities gallery. Both gallery owners were risk-takers, who gave her space to show her work. Nevertheless, by introducing sewing, stuffing and embroidering into Melbourne art galleries, Mora gave the materials meanings of her own, and slowly gained recognition as an artist using 'the very mediums intended to inculcate self-effacement' (Parker 1981, 215).

### *A curated image*

She also had a very acute perception of her public image as a woman artist. These complex identities depend in large measure on history circumstances and social construction. In order to define their style and artistic personality, women artists often devise strategies to carve 'spaces of freedom' within their own lives, where they can create and reinvent themselves, sometimes outside socially established norms (Rohlfesen-Udall 2000). One strategy is the use of material culture, often a prominent element of self-definition for public figures, and one that the anthropologist Daniel Miller calls an 'unspoken form of communication' (Miller 2010, 10). Like her contemporaries, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Niki de St Phalle (1930-2002), Mora was a good example of this approach. Embracing the cult of celebrity, she made remarkable use of material culture in relation to her personal narratives to create an iconic image of herself. Characteristics related to dress, space and attitude were key determinants in the building of her image.

She cultivated a flamboyant public personality, dressing in all circumstances in a girly Victorian style with antique lace collars, frilly petticoats and Mary Jane shoes, repeatedly reframing her personal narrative (interrupted childhood, migration from her native land, bohemian lineage) to help becoming the artist she aspired to be. Similarities with Kahlo, who publicised her tragic personal life, her tumultuous love life and her ethnic-inspired way of dress, and St Phalle, reinventing herself in France after migrating from the USA, far from her abusing father, and championing a hyper feminine way of dressing, only underline the efficiency of this strategy in lifting the invisibility veil that shrouded women artists at the time. For these three artists, the construction of

their personal selves in the public eye included a conscious appropriation of material culture to build their identities (Pankl & Blake 2012). It worked very well; the press articles about Mora are full of these allusions to her dressing style, either purely descriptive such as 'she has a gleeful smile and she still wears little girl dresses and little girl shoes' (*Age*, 5 October 1985) to a bit uncanny ('At 48 she still has the soft face of a teenager, huge black eyes ringed with kohl, long crinkly hair like a doll left out in the rain and clothes like carnival costumes' (*Weekender*, 19 April 1973).

Mora's image and bohemian style evolved throughout the years; but however unconventional and informal her appearance may be compared to the mainstream style, her image was always carefully curated, as different as possible to the scruffy and stained appearance associated with artists like Pollock or Bacon. Mora's agency in the self-construction of this public persona was undeniable and was noted by critics:

She is I'm sure totally conscious of the effect she gives. It is as if the seven or eight hours she spends on her art each day is started by recreating Mirka Mora. The Mirka we see is as much a product of her art as the paintings and embroideries and dolls. The result is always intensely cheering (Clarke 1983)

Indeed, conversation with Mora confirmed that her style was very conscious and reflected her tastes; to the end, she wore the same long flounce skirts that she favoured in the 1950s, and boasted 'I love looking at myself, I love looking at my work, and myself... I like myself a lot!' which was obviously comforting for her self-esteem (Mora 2014). A few diary entries confirmed the care she puts into her appearance. For instance, a full-page drawing on 29 August 1983 shows how she planned her look for a coming workshop in Tasmania, elaborating on the stories associated with each garment, such as the 'white jumper Mof doesn't like' or 'I am taking my black cummerbund I bought in Sydney in 1968'. Another diary entry shows the obvious attention she put into her appearance, detailing her clothing and make up and noting that she could take more advantage of it, but decided not to: 'Wearing silk and lace and Christian (*Dior?*) shoes and bag. Should accentuate my make-up but enough is enough' (24 July 1986).

As this carefully elaborated personal style became a trademark image, Mora's sense of 'performative dress' extended to props; her prams and her scooter were famous in St Kilda and were given pride of place in the papers, with an image of her riding her scooter with her frilly dress, girly shoes and hat,



titled 'Arty grandma Mirka loves taking it to the streets' (*Weekend Herald*, 7-8 September 1985). She derived intense satisfaction from this celebrity and the fact that she was different from the mainstream, commenting with pride 'I loved my scooter, I told everyone to buy one, it is so nice, and then it became a fashion, I started it, but in St Kilda!' (Mora 2014).

She was extremely clever in this creation of her image. Clothing is one of the strongest materials for expressing the self and mediating relationships with other people. Miller argues that far from being superficial, clothes make human beings what they are – or rather what they think they are and want to project (Miller 2010, 10, 22). The sociologist Sophie Woodward described a woman's wardrobe as 'the palette from which women paint themselves daily', while dressing is claimed to be a 'daily creation of artworks' (Woodward 2005, 23). Woodward draws upon Gell's notion of 'distributed personhood', where selfhood is externalized and distributed in space through various material objects, in order to explain clothing as a two ways process. Interpreted from inside out, clothing communicates the intentions of the self, while from outside in, clothing interiorizes the anticipated judgment of others. From this perspective, the three artists' chosen styles of dress, make strong statements that need to be understood in the historical context prevalent before the feminist movement of the mid 1970s. In personal but different ways, the three women tested the limits of 'what it meant to be a woman and to be a painter', sometimes at considerable expense to their personal life (Rohlfen Udall 2000, 1).

Mora reinforced her image with an eccentric behaviour, which attracted public attention but was always totally devoid of any nastiness. Either baring her bottom at the inauguration of her *Tympanum* (1977) in the presence of the French ambassador, or turning a pirouette at the unveiling of her Flinders Street mural (1986) in the presence of the Minister for the Arts – who told her he wished he could have done it too! (Mora 2013 b), she ensured constant media attention to her public persona. Acting in such a way procured her great satisfaction, and defined her own form of feminism, which did not mean renouncing feminine material culture's attributes, but instead adding a different discourse to the classical image of women.

To the public display of their elaborate personae, Mora and Kahlo alike added the exhibition of their home, which doubled as their working place. Ambivalent early memories resulted in both women creating personal spaces where toys have a prominent place, which reclaim their lost or interrupted

childhoods, and which according to Rohlfesen-Udall (2000, 232), function as metaphors of the self. Both private houses were crammed with objects, pots and pans, and lots of toys; both artists had an extensive collection of dolls and dollhouses; Mora painted her windows with decorative patterns and mixed her toy collection with art materials and her own works of art. This exuberance of material culture and artistic creation, coupled with the spaces' bright decoration, contributed for both artists to the invention of their lifestyle, intrinsic to their public image.<sup>13</sup>

### *Communicating through materials*

Miller remarks that 'stuff matters', and that its absence or presence is a definition of either poverty or experience (Miller 2010, 125). Among other interpretations, he reads material culture as a 'technology of attachment', which can provide support during difficult times in one's life (Miller 2008, 89). Miller's powerful image of people's possessions as sediments, which are laid down as 'foundations for material walls mortared with memory' applies beautifully to Mora's home, where every object has a story attached, their accumulation being of great comfort to the artist (Miller 2008, 89). Mora spoke of her clutter as 'the thread of my memory wanting to have its own continuity through familiar objects' (Mora 2003, 1). This environment was equally reflected in her art, both in subject matter and in her style, that borrows from folk art and mythology, with an abundance of decorative and vegetal patterns.

But she was also very generous with her techniques and materials, transforming them into a means of communicating with people. Having turned from an artist/mother/wife/restaurateur into an artist/teacher, she worked for CAE for 23 years, teaching her own working processes such as doll-making, embroidery, watercolour and painting. This was perfectly in line with the public art policies of the 1980s in Victoria, seeking to make art more accessible to the 'non-elite'. Nevertheless, sharing one's own techniques is an uncommon and very generous attitude for an artist, and Mora's workshops quickly became very popular events. Former participants fondly recall the feeling of joy and of creative stimulation in these workshops, and how proud they were of their creations, 'sensing that their tutor had confidence in them' (Anonymous 1990). From her own analysis, Mora's enduring success as a teacher, marked by an award from CAE, was due to her ability to bring out the artist in every person (Anonymous 1993). She privileged communication over status, explaining that she simplified her art to make it accessible for the

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see 'This artist's home is a living work of art', *Home*, August 18, 2001, 31.

workshops and readily showed her own materials for inspiration (Mora 1984). Similarly, in her own practice, materials were just another way of nurturing relationships. Nicola McGaan (her assistant on the Flinders Street mosaic) recalls that friends such as Barry Humphries or Noah Taylor would frequently come up the scaffold, and make a small section of the mosaic, which Mirka would ask McGaan to remove once they had left (McGaan 2014). This sheds light on Mora's kind way of drawing the line between her friendships and the ownership of her art, but also her manner of 'making together' to impart extra value to friendships. This original way of communicating through sharing and doing, continually investing the materials and processes of her art with the task of mediating relationships between herself and those around her, was a characteristic of Mora's personality, and contributed in no small part to foster her artistic reputation.

Even when she was no longer teaching and sharing her techniques, Mora still used her materials' power of communication, frequently posing in her studio for the press. Artists' studios have always exerted a fascination for the public, as 'conjuring places of new concepts, styles and forms' (Lebourdais 2016). Although this romantic vision is disputed in books such as *Inside the artist's studio* (Fig 2015), a collection of interviews that aims to shed light on the real day-to-day process of the artist, requiring time, hard work, and persistence to succeed, artist's studios speak powerfully to the public's imagination. In Mora's case, there was no doubt that her image, surrounded by the tools of her trade, very effectively communicated to the readers her status as the archetypal female artist.

## CONCLUSION

This review of the importance of material culture in Mora's life, as an artist and as a woman, reveals the deep significance of her choice of materials and techniques, and the extent of her own agency in the making and control of her public image. Approaching Mora's person and production from a different perspective grounded in material culture studies, gender theory, and phenomenology opens to a better understanding of the layered meanings behind her processes. In her works, relationships abound between her techniques and the broader contexts of feminism, craft movement and public art policies in the twentieth century, as well as the culture of celebrity in the beginning of the twenty first century. Her life story, the lives of the works and their complex creative processes are intimately linked to each other. Mora created things in a manner that impacted on her social behaviour, and social

movements impacted on Mora's creation. Her agency in making myths about her own persona recalls another great figure of bohemianism, the journalist Marcus Clarke in the 1860s, whose flamboyant figure of a non-conformist symbolised a counter culture based on creativity and romanticism (Moore 2012). Indeed, Mora credits the writings of one of Clarke's contemporaries, French novelist Henry Murger and his book *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, (1851) for her decision to migrate to Melbourne, claiming a place that the city readily gave her in the bohemian tradition, enhanced by her French migrant status and the Mora couple's social status in the art world. Using archetypes of bohemia as a self-marketing strategy certainly helped Mora to 'accumulate cultural capital and achieve distinction' (Moore 2015), proving the enduring appeal of both bohemia and European migrants in the story of modern Australia. However, she was much more than this; a woman artist carving her way into recognition, a very hard working artist with a strong cultural background, whose subtle creative processes established a material legacy that only now starts to be examined in its own right.

Mora's materials and idiosyncratic modes of making art are much more than just inert substances animated by the artist. They contribute to assert her position in Australia's pantheon of artists, as much as her public image that ensured her visibility in the social scene. Her sense of 'performative dress' locates Mora within a broader frame of female artists in the twentieth century, a time where, for women, getting a voice on the art scene was not an easy feat. Mora invested in her materials, and always considered them as another type of language, which she liberally used throughout her career. The concepts embedded into her creative processes range from tradition and knowledge to gender and eternity, and an enduring meditation on the act of transforming various matter into art through constant technical innovation. Mora's works resonate strongly in viewers' minds because they combine the symbolic power of materials with the agency inherent to their sophisticated modes of making and their mythological imagery. Therefore, in all of Mora's artistic endeavours, materials can be seen as an embodiment of the artist, transformed through processes invested with her personality, and becoming ultimately a representation of the self.

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