

# Symbolic Mosaics

## 2025 Student Annual

Symbolism is a tool that artists often use to convey ideas. A symbol is an image or object that stands for something else (such as a heart for love or a tree for life). In [زهرة وطني \(Flower For My Homeland\)](#), Christina Dababneh used the symbol of an iris to represent her ancestral home country, Jordan. Dababneh depicted this symbol through mosaic, an ancient artmaking technique of securing decorative tiles—called tesserae—into cement. Mosaics are common throughout Islamic art and are often used as decorative elements in architecture.

Use the prompts below to consider how other artists in the *Student Annual* have used symbolism in their work.

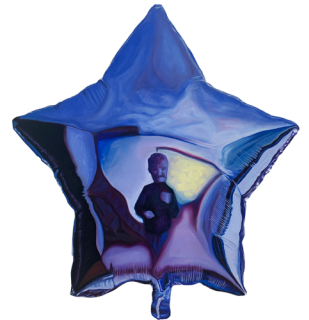
- What does the iris in Dababneh's mosaic mean to you?
- What do you associate with each of the shoes in Caroline Sweeney's [Between Steps](#)?
- What does the balloon in [You're A Star](#) by Donnie Cady make you think of?



Christina Dababneh, [زهرة وطني \(Flower For My Homeland\)](#), 2025. Stained glass, wood, grout. Courtesy of the artist.



Caroline Sweeney, [Between Steps](#), 2025. Ceramic. Courtesy of the artist.



Donnie Cady, [You're A Star](#) (detail), 2025. Oil on Masonite. Courtesy of the artist.

After analyzing the artworks, use the prompts below to create your own symbolic mosaic.

### Step 1: Brainstorm ideas.

- Think of a person, place, thing, or experience that is important to you.
- Sketch a variety of symbols that you could use to represent your chosen subject.

### Step 2: Draw your design.

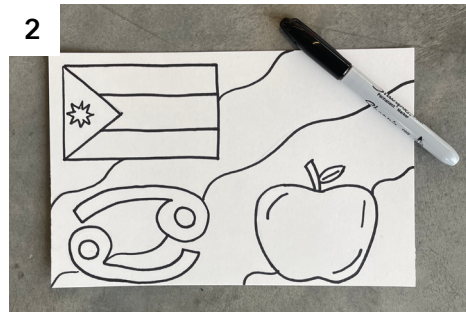
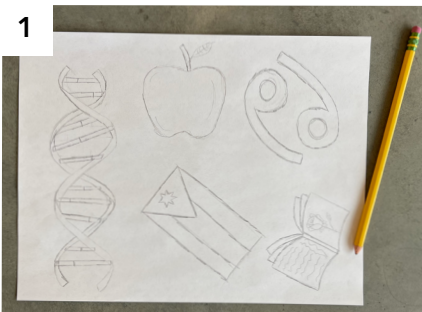
- Select one or more of the symbols you sketched to include in your mosaic.
- Draw an outline of your chosen symbol(s) onto a thick piece of white paper, such as posterboard or cardstock.

### Step 3: Color your design.

- Use colored pencil, crayon, or marker to color your symbol(s) and background.
  - Like Cylas Fox's [Community](#), consider using warm colors (red, orange, or yellow) and cool colors (blue, green, or purple) to create contrast between your symbol(s) and background.



Cylas Fox, [Community](#), 2024. Mixed-media (paper, ink, beads, and chain). Courtesy of the artist.



#### Step 4: Create your mosaic.

- Gather cut pieces of paper or other materials (such as beads, buttons, sticks, seeds, or fabric) to use as your tesserae.
- Arrange the tesserae within your symbol(s) and background.
  - Leave a small gap between the tesserae to reveal the background colors below.
  - Use glue to adhere the tesserae to the surface of your paper.

#### Step 5: Share your work with a partner.

- Discuss what the symbol(s), colors, and materials used in your artwork mean to you.



Step 6: Photograph your work and share it with us by tagging us on Instagram at [#universitygalleriesisu](https://www.instagram.com/universitygalleriesisu).

#### Selection from the press release:

Since 1974, the *Student Annual* has showcased new artwork produced by students at Illinois State University. This exhibition has offered many students the first opportunity to have their work reviewed by professionals outside the University. Each year, two external arts professionals determine which works are selected for the exhibition and which works receive awards.

This year's design juror was [Heather Snyder Quinn](#). This year's studio juror was [Selina Trepp](#).

[University Galleries](#), a unit in the Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, is located at 11 Uptown Circle, Suite 103, at the corner of Beaufort and Broadway streets. Parking is available in the Uptown Station parking deck located directly above University Galleries—the first hour is free, as well as any time after 5:01 p.m.

**All events are free and open to the public.**