

## AUTHENTICATION

### 1. LOGO

Authentication starts with a logo. No logo, no Montici.

True, Blow issued a limited number of mosaic pieces with no logo between the start of his mosaic career circa 1947 and the creation of the first Montici logo in 1951. But the odds are against finding such early pieces on the market.



### Pyramids and Dots

On May 25, 1951, Blow registered with the U.S. Patent and Trademark office his famous, classic black-and-white “two-triangle” logo, Blow had impeccable style and taste, right down to his choice of material for his tiny, signature logo. These original logos were made out of legendary Murano glass from Venice, called *murino* in Italian. Per Lastrucci, the glass came out of the fire in the form of aa tube; the tube was then sliced into individual logos. According to scholars, Venetians have been making glass for over 1,500 years, and on the Venetian island of Murano since the 13th century.



In addition to the original 1951 Logo, Blow also created and used a second logo, a stylized letter “M” with a white dot on top. This dot logo was registered in Italy on Feb. 23, 1956.

Why he created a second logo is an interesting story, shared with our sister Rosemary by *maestro* Bruno Lastrucci. At some point in the 1950s, the workshop ran out of logos, due to the exploding demand for Blow’s art pieces. While impatiently waiting for the reorder from Venice, Blow created the second logo to fill the gap. The simple dot ended up as a “cap” when translated into material. This dot logo continued to be used -- alongside the original logo -- right into the 1970s. Both are genuine. But according to Lastrucci, Blow intended that the original, Murano-glass logo remain the Company’s symbol; and it remained his personal favorite.

Knowing when Blow created his logos can help us cross-verify date claims for a Montici piece. We recently came across a Montici butterfly mosaic on First Dibs. The seller’s description included “*Date of Manufacture: 1940. Period: 1940-1949.*” The logo embedded in the mosaic was the dot logo. This raises two problems for the claimed date. First, to the best of our knowledge, Blow didn’t start manufacturing mosaics until 1946; so the year 1940 is impossible. Second, according to Bruno Lastrucci, Blow didn’t register his dot logo until 1956, suggesting it wasn’t around in the 1940s. Thus the correct date for the mosaic is most likely the mid-Fifties -- not the 1940s, and certainly not the year 1940. We came across a second questionably dated piece on First Dibs It was a Zodiac-themed Montici mosaic. The seller wrote: “Circa 1947... Stunning and very early (c. 1947-50) marble and gemstone tile...” It too bears the dot logo, first registered in 1956.

Does an inaccurate date affect the artwork’s sales value? Probably not. But I’m guessing most collectors do value accurate information.

### **Irregularities**

Because they are fabricated so small, a logo might look slightly irregular and still be genuine.



For example, the cap on the second logo might tilt to the right instead of the left. Or the peaks of the original twin pyramids logo may be slightly different in height.

### **Insertion**

The logo was inserted into a tiny hole and cemented there. Look for cementing. The logo should show that it was cemented directly into the art. If you're bidding online, and relying solely on a photo, blow it up and look carefully.

### Visibility and Clarity

The complete logo should be visible. WE came across an interesting piece with a partially visible logo on EBay in 2013 that would have made us nervous as a buyer. According to the seller's description, *"The M inset appears to have a slight over-application of cement, which obscures the right-hand portion. This may well have occurred during the making, or perhaps after, it is difficult to tell at this point in time. I have provided as clear a detail photo as I could get of this area, which I think accurately represents how it looks under close inspection."*



The seller kindly provided a close up but, even after we further enlarged the photo ourselves it was inconclusive to us. We could clearly see what appeared to be one peak of the original twin-pyramid logo, but not the other. But the seller made no mention in his description of any signature, date, label or other markings on the back of the mosaic. At this point, we would normally walk away from such a piece. However, the style and figures suggested it might in fact be an authentic Montici



Blow's fellow artist and very good friend, Massimo Campigli, painted a 1952 piece of art entitled "*Donne con Ombrello*," A photo of the painting (above left) appears in the Opificio exhibition catalogue "Il Novecento Per Il Museo dell' Opificio delle Pietre Dure." Compare the two women on the right in the painting to the two women in the mosaic. We also know Blow's Montici studio produced several mosaics based on Campigli's paintings. Our conclusion -- the mosaic was probably genuine. In the end, it found a buyer at \$2500



Our family never personally met Campigli, but we heard a lot about the dashing artist from our Connecticut neighbor, Muriel King, who originally introduced us to Richard Blow. According to Muriel, Campigli had fallen in love with her at some point and had given her a large portrait he did of her. It hung proudly in her dining room. Before Muriel passed away, she gave my mother a trunk filled with her letters, photos, drawings, and other memories. It sat untouched in our barn for 40 years. In 2019, while researching for a planned Guidebook, we rummaged through it and discovered a photograph of what looks like a Campigli painting featuring ladies and umbrellas.

### **Position**

The logo is normally found on the front of the mosaic, usually at a top or bottom corner. But you will occasionally find it artfully and discretely placed within the art itself.



Here is a pretty Montici pietra dura piece with a more traditional floral theme, sold on EBay in 2019, with the logo cleverly hidden in the bud of a flower.



Manipulating the tiny logo into place by hand sometimes resulted in tilted logos (above left). In one Montici piece (above right), the logo is actually inserted sideways. According to Bruno Lastrucci, Blow deliberately inserted the logo sideways in some mosaics Montici produced late in his career. He viewed the sideways placement as a sort of stylized letter “B” representing the Blow signature. The “B” signature was used on at least some of Blow’s paintings.





In the "Sagittarius #1" Montici mosaic above, signed by Fiaschi, the logo is inserted in the bottom right-hand corner -- but completely upside down.

We have only come across one piece where the logo appears on the back instead of the front. It was sold on EBay in 2019. According to the seller's description, *"This Richard Blow work is signed with the Montici 'M' cipher to the reverse, rather than the normally used frontal locations, and a sheet of glass is adhered to the backing slate to mount the plaque in the frame, while also keeping the signature and the 'Made In Italy' inscribing visible. This work is documented in a 1952 photo of a Montici display at The Museo dell'Opificio delle Pietre Dure, which is shown only for reference, as the final photo, the work in lower right corner."*

The capped logo looks real, though the color is odd (because it is under glass?). The inscribed "Made in Italy" looks authentic (as is typical, the middle word, "in", is smaller than the words "Made" and "Italy"). But why would it employ a piece of glass on the back? There is one possible explanation. Some Florentine mosaicists (e.g., Montelatici) would sometimes mount a mosaic on glass so the buyer could turn it over and see the individual pieces and how they were joined together. But if that is the reason, the photo supplied by the seller doesn't show or note this detail. It eventually sold for \$2800. Interestingly enough, an almost identical looking piece (possibly the same piece?) came up at auction five months before, in November 2018. It was listed by a well-established Chicago-based auction house as simply "Attributed to Richard Blow" with an estimated price of \$600-\$800. It sold for \$375.

Our database includes one other reference to the possibility of a Montici logo on the back (Leslie Hindman Auctioneers, 2018: *"Four of the plaques are signed with an inlaid Montici cipher to the front or back."*)



Blow also applied the Montici brand to other pieces his workshop produced, including desk objects and furniture. Here, the original logo inserted into a stone box.



This unique, Blow paperweight listed on EBay fetched almost a thousand dollars (\$975) in February 2019. Notice how the logo is inserted into the stone



This Blow tiger stripe dining table sold for \$18,000 on EBay in April 2019. The seller provided multiple photos in the listing. One shows the underside of the table top incised with the words “Made Italy” (no middle word “in”). Note the use of the Montici dot logo



Sometimes it's placed on the table top instead. Rago Arts sold this beautiful Blow table in May 2018 for a premium price of \$17,500.



We catalogued a similar logo placement (on the tabletop) on a handsome white table sold for \$3700 by Stair Galleries on Sept 10, 2011.

## 2. SIGNATURES

First let's define what we mean by a “signature.”

Italian art historian Matila Simon opened the door to some confusion in her 1976 book *“Florentine Mosaics and Richard Almond Blow.”* Her brief biography of Richard Blow became the standard quoted by art dealers, auction houses, and online art databases like Blouin and ArtNet. In it, she wrote *“...each piece was marked with a tiny **M stone insert as a Montici signature** and signed on the back by Blow himself.”* It was a poetic but unfortunate choice of words. A signature is a person's written name. The M stone is a mark, cipher, logo, brand.

This opened the door for sellers to declare their piece is “signed by Richard Blow,” when in fact it only bears the Montici logo.

If the seller doesn't specifically reference a signature of Richard Blow inscribed on the back (or “verso”) of the piece, it is wise to assume it's not signed by Blow. When in doubt, ask for a photograph of the back.



The best auction houses and art indexes will flag the difference between a “signature” and a logo. They may refer to the logo as an “inlaid cipher 'M'”; or describe it as “signed M”; while separately referencing an “incised signature and date verso 'Richard A Blow'.”

Be even more cautious with pieces described this way:

*“Attributed to Richard Blow...”*

*“Richard Blow (attrib.) pietra dura plaque...”*

*“In the manner of Richard Blow...”*

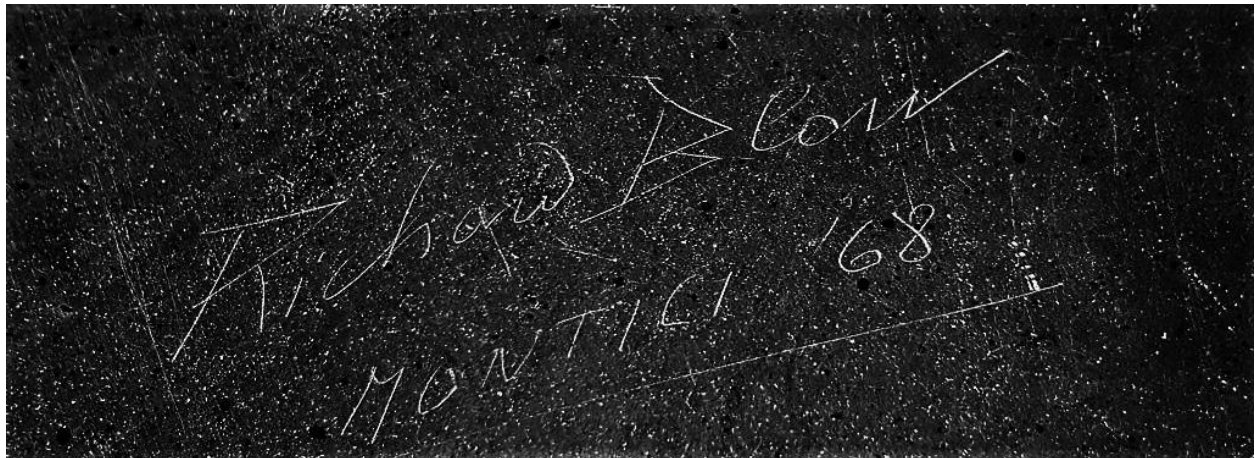
*“This reminds me of works by artist Richard Blow...”*

The seller is telling you he has no proof it’s a genuine Richard Blow artwork -- or even a genuine Montici piece. Our suggestion: buy it if you love it, but not for investment.

Signed pieces are the exception. Less than one -third of the 300+ pieces in our database boast a signature of the artist.

### **Richard Blow solo signature**

If you’re lucky enough to bid on a signed Richard Blow, here’s several photos of what a genuine, signature looks like.



Note the typical angled, sharp lines of the “B” and “w” in his last name. Below his signature, Blow frequently added “Montici” and the year. If you see them together, you’ve got extra confirmation the signature is real. This signature comes from the back of a mosaic given to my mother by Richard himself.



Here, Blow signed his name adding his middle initial "A." It's another piece gifted directly to our family by Richard Blow himself.

What does that initial "A" stand for? Biographer Maitila Simon says "Almond," like the nut. But his given middle name was Richard "Allmand" Blow, with an "a" -- a family name sported by multiple Blow ancestors. Richard himself used both. In his Princeton University yearbooks, he's "Almond.". But his 1920 and 1925 U.S. passports show "Allmand."



Here's a clearer "A," found on his 1969 piece "Two Cats," auctioned by Wright in 2017 for \$2750.

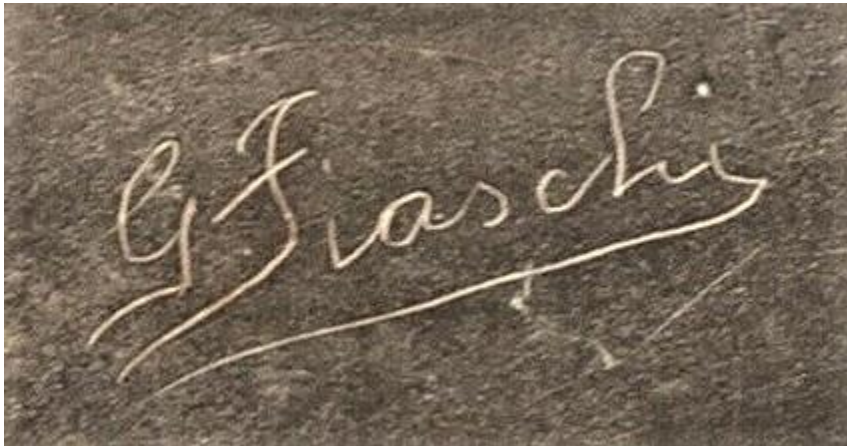
### **Richard Blow - Initials Only**

According to Bruno Lastrucci, Bruno sometimes signed a mosaic on behalf of Blow, with Blow's permission, using the simple initials "R.B." for Richard Blow. An example is found on the back of the "Scale" mosaic (Lot # 109) in the Edelsberg collection auctioned off by Wright in October 2019.

## Richard Blow plus Co-Signer

In our database, we find Blow co-signing pieces with four master mosaicists—Renzo Fracassini, Giuseppe Fiaschi Leopoldo Menegatti, and Calderani. Blow obviously appreciated and valued their superb craftsmanship; they may have even significantly contributed to the original design as well. The result was a truly collaborative piece of art -- with both signers equally credited for its genius.

- **Blow + Giuseppe Fiaschi.** Fiaschi (1892-1956) was a close friend and colleague of Blow. Blow gravitated to Fiaschi and his workshop from the very beginning, giving him commissions starting in 1947. According to Italian art historian Anna Maria Massinelli, "(Blow) considered Fiaschi to be the most up-to-date mosaicist of the era from both an iconographic and technical standpoint..." Fiaschi trained under famous pietra dura master Giovanni Montelatici at the Arte dei Mosaico studio before starting his own workshop and school for mosaic artists after WWII. He made a name for himself executing church mosaics, with a reputation for exquisite detail and nuanced stonework, and exhibited in both Europe and the United States. He died suddenly in 1956, having made a significant contribution to the success and reputation of Blow's pietra dura masterpieces.



Here's an example of Giuseppe Fiaschi's signature found on the back of the Montici mosaic "Sagittarius #1, a 5 x 6 inch mosaic offered on EBay in August 2020. Fiaschi used only his first initial "G".



*Giuseppe Fiaschi. Photo credit: Bruno Lastrucci.*



*Bruno Lastrucci working in the Fiaschi workshop. Photo Credit: "Painting in Stone" Aska Publishers (2014)*

Blow's relationship to Fiaschi's workshop continued under Fiaschi's son Giovanni. Bruno Lastrucci had transferred to Fiaschi's workshop in 1954 after Blow's auto accident and three-year absence from Italy. When Blow recovered and returned, he used Fiaschi's workshop to produce most of his subsequent designs, relying on Lastrucci to execute the commissions. In 1973, Giovanni himself died, and Lastrucci took over the business.

- **Blow + Leopoldo Menegatti.** Menegatti (1900-1983) executed some of the first pietra dura art pieces Blow designed. Leopoldo came from Florentine pietra dura "royalty" – three generations of mosaic makers active since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. His celebrated father, Alberto, was commissioned between 1906 and 1909 to restore the pietra dura stones on the throne of Mughal Emperor of India. Although he was trained in traditional pietra dura themes, Leopoldo embraced experimentation. According to Massinelli, "In the 1940s and 1950s, Leopoldo took part in the new research conducted by Florentine workshops thanks to Richard Blow's input, with a production revolving around naturalistic repertoires and seascapes, using stylized designs exploiting the natural colors and veining of the stones." His work was exhibited in the United



States alongside Blow in the famous 1951 “Italy at Work,” traveling exhibit inaugurated at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.

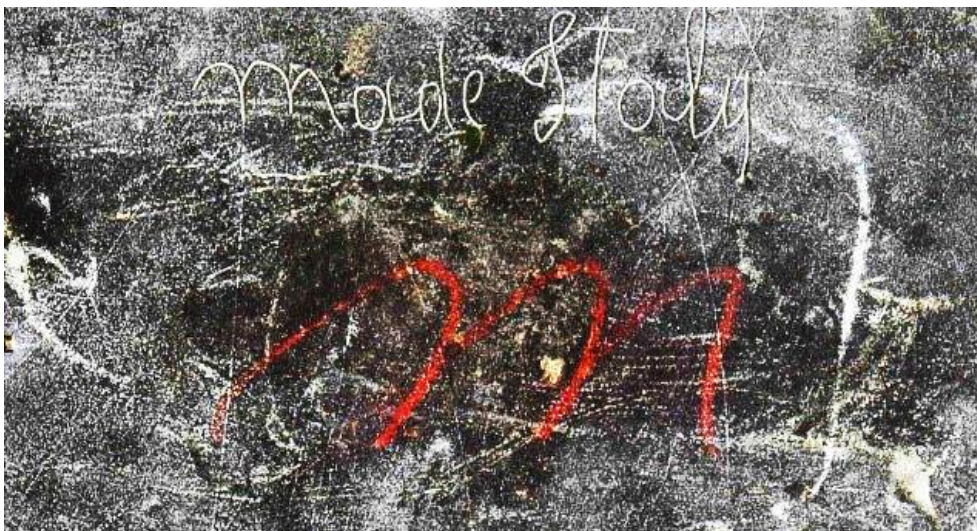


Menegatti typically signed his own workshop art in cursive on the front. But Blow placed the Montici logo on the front, so Menegatti apparently moved his signature to the back, using red script.



We have only one Montici mosaic confirmed as signed by Menegatti in our database. The Menegatti signature is found above Richard Blow's personal signature on "Patricia's Butterfly." The mosaic was personally given to my mother in the late 1960s by Richard Blow.

We have in our database a second Montici piece that may possibly have been signed by Menegatti. The "Two Butterflies" plaque sold for \$1275 on EBay in November 2015; and resold later in October 2019 for \$2750.



The clues suggesting this are intriguing. One, it's the only Montici piece found in our database featuring cursive script for the 'Made in Italy' marking. All other pieces we have feature block lettering. Two, the "M" letter is written in red ink or crayon – just like the Menegatti signature on "Patricia's Butterfly" -- the only other piece in our database with a red signature. Three, the red capital "M" on this piece matches the style of the "M" on the full signature found on the "Patricia's Butterfly" piece. Four, the double butterfly piece stays within that butterfly genre. theme. Case not quite closed, but at least plausible. At a minimum, the buyer got a genuine Montici piece; at best, he or she got a rarity – a signed Menegatti Montici as well.

- **Blow + Renzo Fracassini.** Fracassini was a third *maestro* mosaicist producing pietra dura masterpieces in Florence before Blow returned to Italy in 1947. In 1961, the two artists produced and co-signed the beautiful "American Paddle Steamer" mosaic which was auctioned off in 2018 by dealer James Julia.



Above is a Fracassini signature inscribed on the back of "Cat Boot," a surreal composition executed in 1959 that features an odd pairing of cat, a fish, a snake, a woman's high button up boot, and a mysterious symbol (It's featured on the Home page of this website). He signed his name in simple block, capital letters instead of cursive.

- **Blow + Calderani** -- According to Lastrucci, Calderani helped Fracassini run his workshop. This suggests Calderani was a master craftsman in his own right. Calderani co-signed mosaics with both Blow and Fracassini.

### **Maestro Solo Signatures (without Blow)**

Blow honored a few designers/master craftsmen by allowing them to sign their names solo to Montici pieces that they may have personally designed and/or executed. In addition to pieces solo-signed Fiaschi and Fracassini, our database includes multiple Montici mosaics solo-signed by Fernando Nenci and Calderani.

- **Fernando Nenci** (1912-1959?) was the first *maestro* hired to run the new Montici workshop. According to Lastrucci, Blow recruited him to be a technical director, but the veteran mosaicist Nenci saw himself as artistic director as well. Like his father Nello (famous for his floral pietra dura works) Fernando had trained and worked at the commercially successful





*Photo Fernando Nenci. Credit: Bruno Lastrucci*

Fratelli Bencini workshop before taking over Montici. He brought considerable experience and talent to the job and played a major role in its early growth. Unfortunately, Blow and Nenci eventually had a fallout after Blow discovered Nenci had also done some work for other people in Blow's absence.



Nenci used a cursive signature with a fancy "F" (for Fernando) and flowing capital "N". This signature is found on the verso of a Montici watermelon mosaic offered on EBay on 2/16/20

- **Calderani.** Our database includes nine pieces personally signed solo by Calderani.



Did others sign Montici artwork? It's possible.

If Blow produced 1,500 works of pietra dura art, there is a strong chance our 300+-piece database is incomplete in terms of signers. Who else's signature might turn up at some point on a Montici piece? Here's a few, reasonable possibilities:

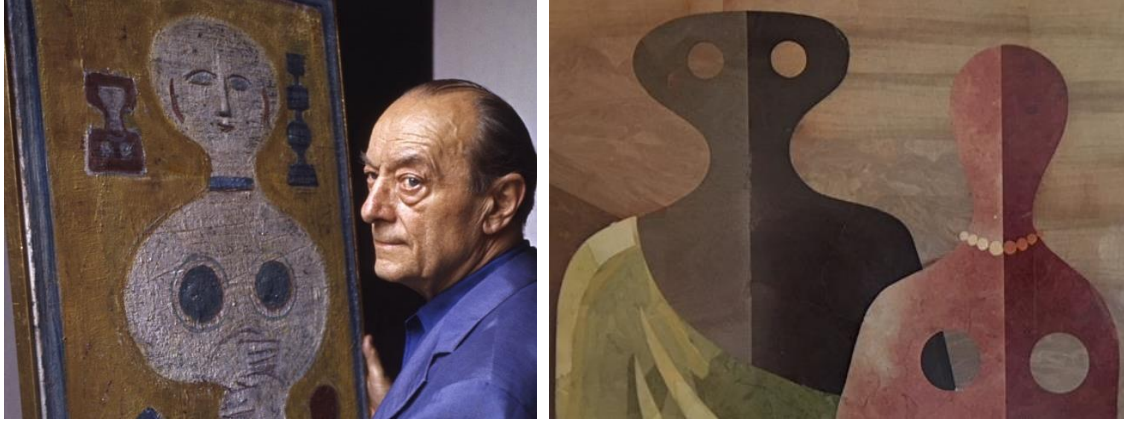
- **Costantino (Tino) Nivola.** Nivola helped Blow create and launch his pietra dura career right after WWII. Nivola's help included designs, according to both Blow biographer Matila Simon and Opificio art curator Annalisa Innocenti. Innocenti notes that "the echo of some of Nivola's feminine figures can be found in the sketches and tiles of Montici." Nivola also participated in the famous 1951 "Italy at Work" traveling exhibit where he is listed in the pietra dura section as a "Designer." Did he sign any of his Montici designs? It would make sense.



Constantino Nivola. *Photo Credit: Costantino Nivola Foundation*

Nivola was an Italian graphic artist and architectural sculptor who loved experimenting with new materials. He directed the Design Workshop at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design and played a significant role in developing the iconic "Olivetti style" embodied in that company's post-war products (some on permanent display at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC).

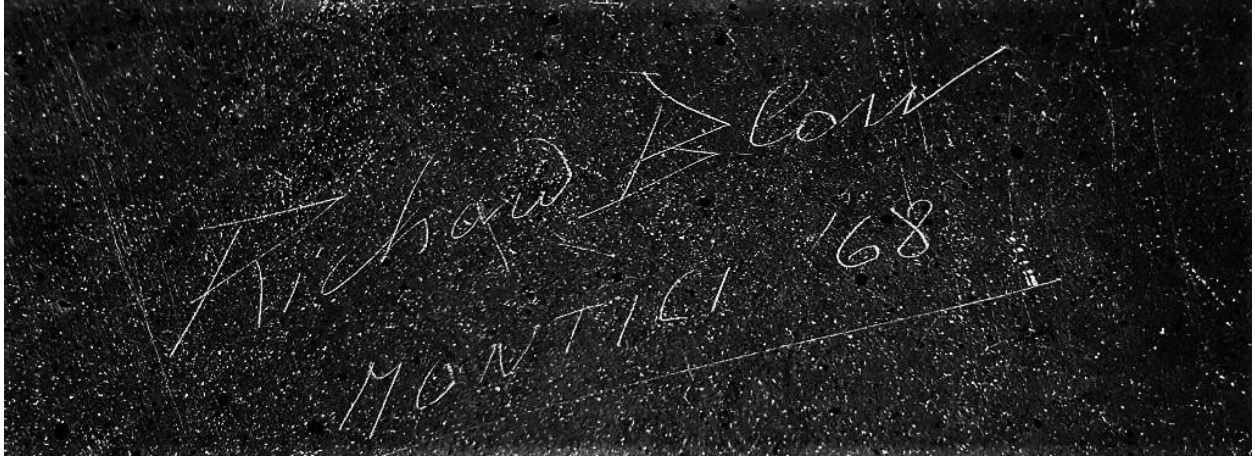




- **Massimo Campigli** (above left) and his paintings directly inspired some Montici mosaics. He was a close friend of Richard Blow, and an established, respected artist. It's certainly possible Blow allowed Campigli to sign Montici pieces which he inspired. Above right is the Montici mosaic "Two Figures" executed in 1968. Its style echoes Campigli. Unfortunately, we have no information on whether it included any signature.
- **Mauro Bini** produced at least one design for Montici. He was born in Florence in 1932 and graduated in Wall Painting and Fresco at the Florence Art Institute and in Theatre Set Design at its Accademia di Belle Arti. In 1953 he founded and managed the Mosaic School at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. According to the *Il Novecento* exhibition catalogue, in 1952 Blow's Montici workshop published a "competition for a design to be produced in hard stone" with the purpose "to create new designs to give a modern impulse to the antique Art of the Florentine mosaic". Contestants were advised to go to the Opificio to see the hard stones and the finished works there. The winner would receive a monetary prize, and the winning design became the property of Montici. Mauro Bini won the competition. Presuming the winning design was eventually executed by Montici, did Bini sign it? You can view a nice selection of Bini mosaics in the *Il Novecento* catalogue.
- **Marco Tacconi** trained under Fiaschi and worked there from 1950-1962. We know Blow visited the Fiaschi studio often; he would have seen Tacconi's work and met Tacconi. The fact that Fiaschi hired Tacconi would tell Blow Tacconi was talented. According to *Mondo Cattolico*, "At an early age he abandoned a career as a painter and dedicated himself for more than 40 years to this particular activity (pietra dura), faithfully representing natural views of somewhat particular subjects. and also of more difficult ones like water, hair, skin etc." Blow was known for encouraging talent and producing the work of independent artists. Did he offer Tacconi a chance to execute and sign for Montici? If so, there's a Montici piece with Tacconi's signature waiting out there for someone to find.
- **Emilio Ugolini** produced some pieces for Richard Blow before Blow set up his own Montici workshop. Did he co-sign anything with Blow? We haven't come across any, but it's possible.

### Place and Date

Blow routinely added below his personally signed pieces the place it was made and the year executed.



Above is a classic Blow date/place marking, appearing below his signature. The place comes first – “Montici,” in block, all-capital letters; followed by the year expressed in just two digits, not four (e.g., “60” for 1960). Both appear on the same line. Sometimes he would add an apostrophe before the two digits.

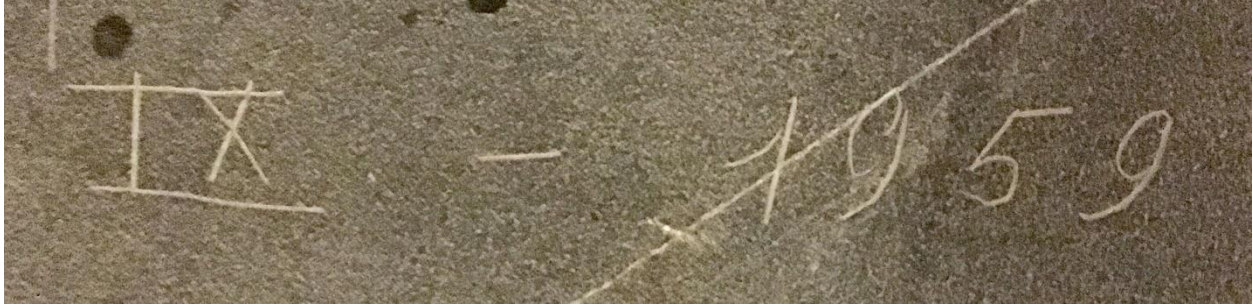


Here’s a rarer Blow variant, found on “Patricia’s Butterfly,” a confirmed Blow-signed piece done in 1960, at the turn of the decade. In addition to “Montici,” it adds the city “Firenze” (Florence).



Most “Montici” inscriptions are in block letters. Here’s an uncommon script variation, with circles for dots. It’s found on the “Arch and Single Triangle” mosaic offered on EBay in April 2020.





Fracassini had his own unique system of dating. This four-digit year is inscribed by Fracassini on the verso of "Cat Boot." The Roman numerals "IX" likely denotes the month the piece was executed (IX= 9 = September). Calderani also used Roman numeral months on some of his pieces.

### **"Made in Italy"**

Most Montici pieces in our database bear the words "Made in Italy" incised on the back.



This is the most common style -- the words are done in block, capital letters, not cursive. Often the middle word "in" is smaller.



This rare, paper label appears on "Patricia's Butterfly."



An example of “Made in Italy” branded on the picture frame instead of being inscribed on the mosaic.

***(END PART 1 OF AUTHENTICATION)***