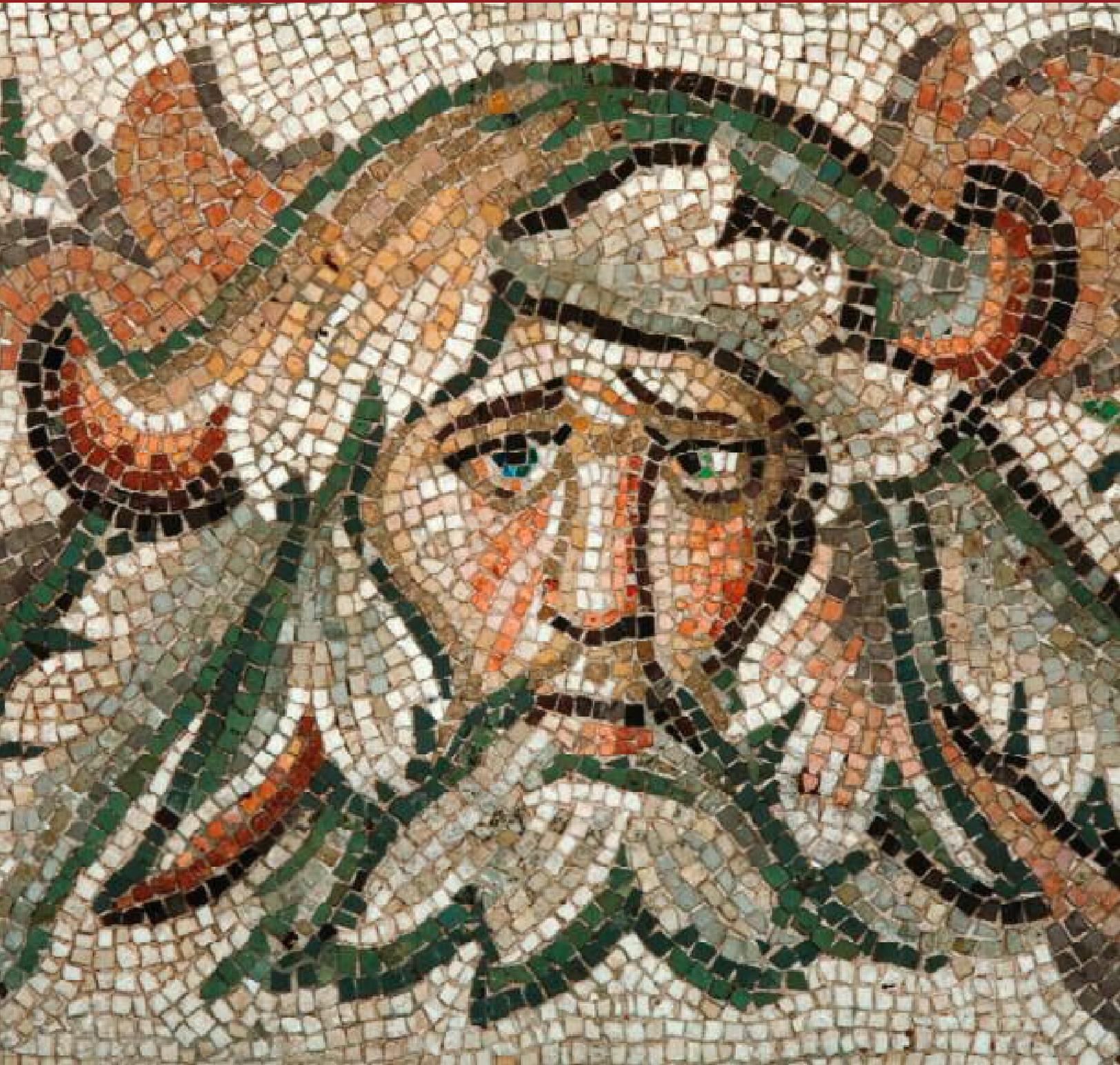


ANCIENT MOSAICS

SELECTIONS FROM THE RICHARD BROCKWAY COLLECTION





ANCIENT MOSAICS

BY JOHN OLBRANTZ

MOSAIC IS AN ART FORM that uses small pieces of colored stone and glass, called *tessera* (plural: *tesserae*), to create designs or pictures set in cement. In antiquity, mosaics were created exclusively to decorate architectural surfaces such as floors, walls, and vaults, and examples have been found in a wide variety of contexts, including palaces, houses, baths, mausoleums, synagogues, and churches. Some scholars have argued that the designs in mosaic floors were inspired by those in carpets, while others have suggested that they mimicked painted, wooden, or stucco relief ceiling decorations.

In Book 7 of his *Ten Books on Architecture*, the Roman architect Vitruvius (ca. 80–70 to after 15 BCE) described several methods for preparing the foundation of a mosaic floor.¹ Typically, a pounded-gravel base was prepared to receive concrete or lime mortar in ascending layers of fineness. Once the base was prepared and the concrete or mortar was in place, the actual setting of the design could begin, following one of three methods of mosaic construction—the direct method, the indirect method, and the reverse method—although any combination of these could be used on a floor.²

The direct method involved setting the individual *tesserae* directly in wet cement. The indirect method involved setting the *tesserae* in sand and gluing a cloth to their upper surface. Once the glue had set, the

complete mosaic was lifted from the sand and set into wet cement. When the cement was dry the glue would be dissolved with hot water to reveal the design. The reverse method was a variation of the indirect method; here, instead of the final surface of the *tesserae* being laid face-up, the pieces were glued face-down onto a cartoon (a preliminary full-scale sketch) drawn or painted on cloth.

Mosaics were a popular art form for thousands of years.³ While the earliest manifestations of mosaic work can be found in Sumerian architecture of the third millennium BCE, the first true mosaic floors were unearthed during excavations in Olynthus, an ancient city in northern Greece, and in the ancient Macedonian capital of Pella. Others have been found on the islands of Delos and Rhodes and from Pergamum in Asia Minor (Turkey). The earliest Greek mosaics depicted mythological subjects and were made with colored pebbles, but by the third century BCE, colored stones and glass were introduced.

Mosaic floors became widespread during Roman times. Following the earlier Greek examples, Roman mosaics usually had a large central square (*emblemata*) depicting a mythological or figurative scene and surrounded by a decorative border of floral and geometric motifs. The *emblemata* was a portable mosaic panel that would have been made elsewhere and inserted into a pavement while the rest of the mosaic was laid

on the spot. While the earliest Roman mosaics continued the late Hellenistic tradition of brilliant color, they were eventually replaced by the black-and-white mosaics that came to characterize the mosaic pavements of Italy.⁴

As Rome expanded its boundaries from the first century BCE to the first and early second centuries CE,⁵ the practice of mosaic making spread throughout western Europe and the ancient Mediterranean region, extending to Spain, Gaul (France), Britain, Germany, North Africa, and as far east as Syria. As the art form

spread, moreover, each geographic region developed its own regional style and repertoire. The mosaic floors of Roman Syria (figure 1), for example, are characterized by lush colors, mythological or figurative scenes set in large central squares and surrounded by elaborate borders, inscriptions to help identify the scenes or figures portrayed, and illusionistic motifs inspired by architectural details.⁶

Ancient mosaic artists probably worked in workshops where there was a clear division of labor between the principal artist who designed the mosaic floor and the



FIGURE 1. *The Judgment of Paris*, from the Atrium House, Antioch, early 2nd century CE, marble, limestone, and glass tesserae, 73 ¼ x 73 ¼ in. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France, MA3443 / The Bridgeman Art Library

supporting craftsmen and apprentices who did the routine work of laying the background.⁷ The size of these workshops clearly varied from place to place, from one or two craftsmen to as many as a dozen during periods of high demand and productivity. Indeed, the continued existence of any workshop depended on the steady supply of mosaic commissions, and there is even some evidence of itinerant mosaic artists moving from one province to another to secure work.

Each workshop typically developed a range of compositions and trademark details that became its stock in trade.⁸ In Roman Britain, for example, scholars have identified at least six separate workshops or schools, each with its own unique compositional arrangements and schemes. Most mosaic artists probably drew on a combination of training, imagination, and their memory of other mosaic floors they had seen to create their own unique compositions and designs. While some scholars have argued that pattern books (collections of designs, patterns, and motifs) were used to transmit compositions and decorative elements from one region to the next, none have survived from antiquity to support this theory.

In addition to a stock repertoire of figurative compositions and elements, the ancient mosaic artist had access to hundreds of ornamental patterns and geometric designs that were based on the standard ornamental vocabulary of Greek art. Designs ranged from very simple arrangements of geometric patterns to immensely complicated and complex combinations (figure 2). Some of the most popular geometric designs in Roman times were the meander (a labyrinth-like design), the guilloche (a braid design), and the lozenge (a diamond-shaped motif), to name only a few. In recent years scholars have identified more than 1,600 patterns and designs that were used in mosaic pavements between the first century BCE and the sixth century CE.⁹



FIGURE 2. *Meander border*, from the Hall of Philia, Antioch, 5th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 44 ½ x 74 ½ in. Baltimore Museum of Art, Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA1937.132

Within the typical Roman house there would have been a clear prioritization of spaces.¹⁰ The most elaborate and expensive mosaic floors, for example, would have been reserved for the *oecus* (parlor or reception room) and *triclinium* (dining room), while less elaborate mosaics would have been used in bedrooms and bath suites. By contrast, the simplest and least costly mosaic floors would have been set in less prominent spaces, such as hallways, walkways, and support spaces. In general, figurative scenes tended to be reserved for spaces that imposed a particular viewpoint, such as the *oecus* and *triclinium*, while floral and geometric patterns were used for spaces that moved the eye forward but did not need to be viewed from a specific viewpoint.

Similarly, a relationship can often be found between the themes of floor designs and the function of the spaces they were intended to decorate.¹¹ In *oeci*, for example, the owner might select a theme from mythology, literature, or daily life, while *triclinia* often featured drinking and banquet scenes, or general subjects from myth and legend. Bath suites often depicted themes associated with water and exercise, such as dolphins, fish, sea nymphs (female spirits), or athletes, while bedrooms might feature mosaic floors depicting Venus and Cupid (the Roman gods of love) or



FIGURE 3. Map of the Roman East

amorous encounters between satyrs (half-bestial woodland spirits) and bacchantes (female devotees of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and revelry). Mausoleums often featured representations of an eschatological nature, while mosaics in churches and synagogues held religious imagery.

The richest discoveries of mosaic floors from Roman Syria (figure 3) come from Antioch (the ancient capital), Seleucia (Antioch's port city), and Daphne (an affluent suburb). In the 1930s American archaeologists from Princeton University unearthed nearly 300 mosaic pavements from private residences at these various sites (figures 4 and 5), offering an intimate glimpse into the private lives of the Roman elite.¹² In



FIGURE 4. Staff members of the archaeological expedition to Antioch (Antakaya, Turkey), 1933. Antioch Expedition Archives



FIGURE 5. Overview of the House of Menander from the southeast corner, Antioch (Antakaya, Turkey), 1939. Antioch Expedition Archives

recent years these works have been supplemented by the discovery of stunning mosaic floors at Apamea (a city in the Orontes Valley), Shahba-Philippopolis (a city on the southern border between Syria and Arabia, and the birthplace of Emperor Philip the Arab), and Palmyra (a caravan city in the eastern desert).¹³

The ancient mosaics in the Richard Brockway collection were acquired by Brockway in Switzerland in the 1970s.¹⁴ They had originally been owned by a Lebanese collector who acquired them in Syria as a young man in the 1950s. Brockway recalls the collector telling him that the mosaics were being neglected and damaged by exposure to the harsh Syrian environment and that he unearthed them from various sites in the Orontes Valley. Unfortunately, the collector did not keep any records of the actual sites from which the mosaic fragments were removed so their date, context, and provenance remain a mystery.¹⁵

The Brockway collection includes several mosaics with geometric patterns. One mosaic (figure 6) features a central square with striped, stepped bands flanked by triangles or half-lozenges and rectangles in various rainbow-style motifs (a technique in which colored *tesserae* are arranged in a diagonal sequence rather than in rows). A second mosaic (figure 7) depicts a two-stranded guilloche band framed by a T-shaped meander pattern and flanked by two undulating lines. Both mosaics have been tentatively dated to the fourth or fifth century CE and may have been part of border decorations of larger figurative mosaic floors that once graced a house or church. Alternatively, they may have been part of smaller mosaic pavements used to decorate a hallway or walkway in a town or country house.

Figurative mosaics were the hallmark of the mosaic artist's repertoire, and the Brockway collection has two interesting examples. One mosaic (figure 8) depicts a standing male figure dressed in a *chlamys* (a

woolen cloak pinned at the right shoulder) and *chiton* (a linen tunic or undergarment). He wears a conical-shaped cap or headdress decorated with rosettes and holds a flower pot or basket inscribed with a sun cross (a symbol associated with the sun and the cycles of nature) in his left hand. Glass *tesserae* are used for highlights. A fragmentary inscription appears above his head and may identify him or the larger scene from which the fragment came. While his identity is unclear, he may represent a mythological figure, a figure with magical or solar/astrol significance, a priest or acolyte of an eastern cult, or be a personification (possibly of spring, whose attribute is flowers). The mosaic has been tentatively dated to the fourth or fifth century CE and may have come from a domestic context.

Personifications, which depict abstract ideas or qualities in human form, became a particularly popular theme for the mosaic artists of Roman Syria.¹⁶ Many of these personifications were established types in the mosaic artist's repertoire, such as the four seasons (although they were usually depicted as women, they could occasionally be portrayed as men), the months of the year, geographical features such as rivers and mountains, elements of nature such as the wind or water, and figurative representations of ideas that were important to the ancient Roman, such as life, luxury, security, joy, safety, manliness, power, hope, abundance, and fertility.

The other figurative mosaic (front cover and figure 9) depicts the head of a nature spirit who inhabited the vine and who became a popular subject in Roman, Jewish, and Christian floor mosaics of the fourth to sixth century CE. He is usually depicted with vines growing from his head and beard and is often associated with the concepts of rebirth and fertility. Birds and animals are often entwined in the vines (figure 10). Below the head is a continuous meander pattern



FIGURE 6. *Geometric pattern*, Roman, Syria, 4th–5th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 32 x 33 x 1 in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida



FIGURE 7. *Geometric pattern*, Roman, Syria, 4th–5th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 21 x 46 ½ x 1 in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida

inset with alternating squares and rectangles of filling ornament (diamond/meander, striped bands, stepped squares, and intersecting octagon designs) in a variety of different colored stones. The floor, at nearly six and one-half feet in length, is the largest mosaic in the Brockway collection and a fine example of the mosaic artist's craft.

As with the unidentified figure or personification, the head of the nature spirit has been tentatively dated to the fourth or fifth century CE. Based on its subject matter and compositional arrangement, it may have been part of the border decoration of a large mosaic floor depicting an eating and drinking scene that once graced the *triclinium* of a town or country house somewhere in the Orontes Valley. Elaborate borders, inhabited by gods, humans, floral and vegetative motifs, heads, animals, geometric designs and patterns, ribbons, and personifications, were characteristic devices employed by the mosaic artists of Roman Syria.

In addition to figurative scenes, animals were an important subject for the ancient mosaic artist, especially in North Africa and the Near East. They could be the subject of hunting, pastoral, or aquatic scenes, or they could be used as filling ornament for other types of compositional arrangements and schemes. The animals ranged from lions and tigers to peacocks and fish. The Brockway collection has two animal mosaics: a mosaic of two deer (figure 11) and a mosaic depicting a goat (frontispiece and back cover). The deer mosaic has been tentatively dated to the third or fourth century CE,¹⁷ while the goat mosaic has been tentatively dated to the fifth or sixth century CE, although their exact context and provenance is unknown.

In these types of mosaic pavements, animals were often depicted attacking or grappling with their prey or, like the two prancing deer and charming little goat, standing or walking peacefully. A limited selection of landscape elements, such as trees, bushes, or

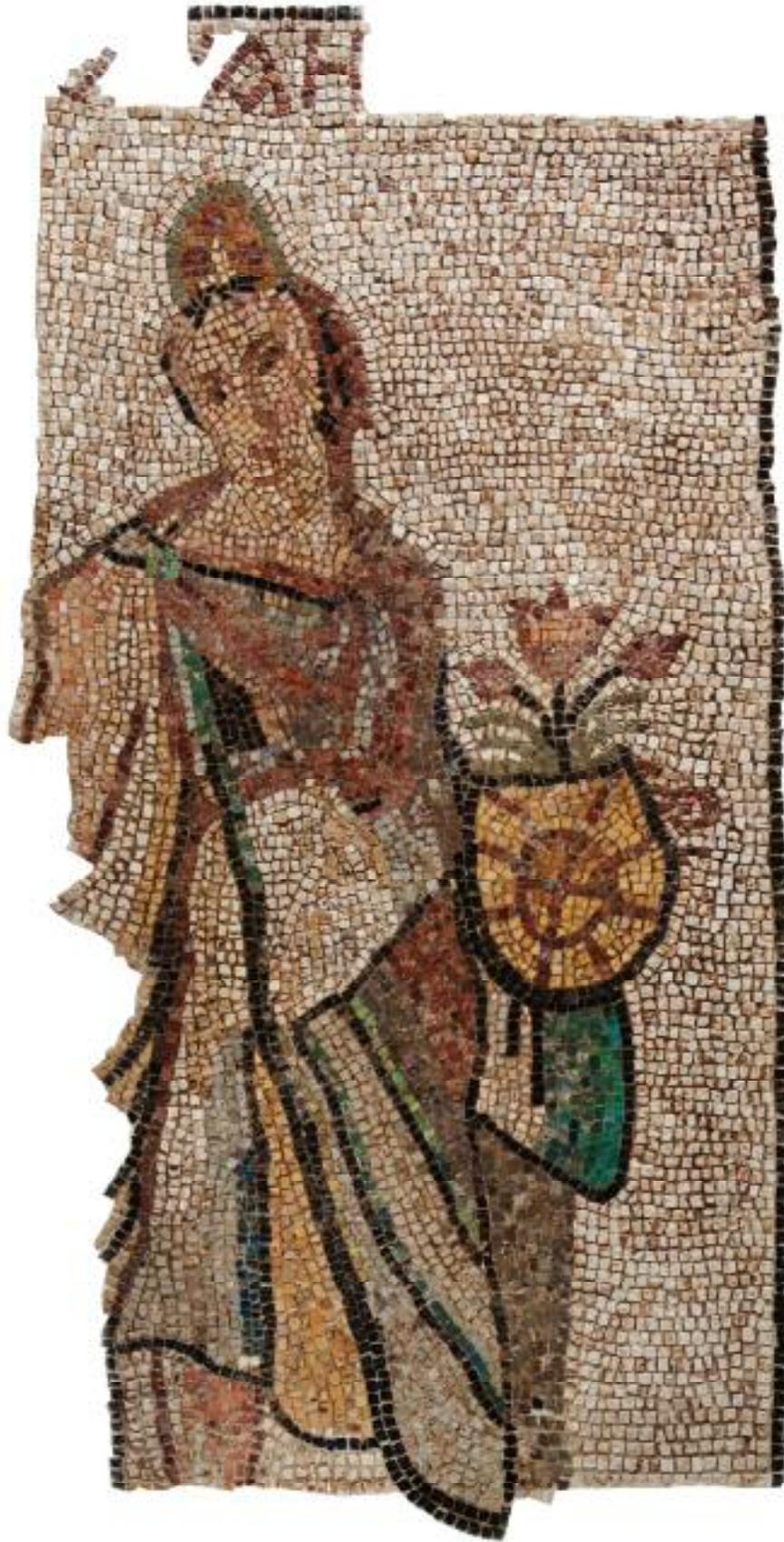


FIGURE 8. *Standing male figure*, Roman, Syria, 4th–5th century CE, naturally colored stone and glass *tesserae*, 39 ½ x 26 ½ x 1 in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida



FIGURE 9. *Male head*, Roman, Syria, 4th–5th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 33 ½ x 83 x 1 ½ in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida

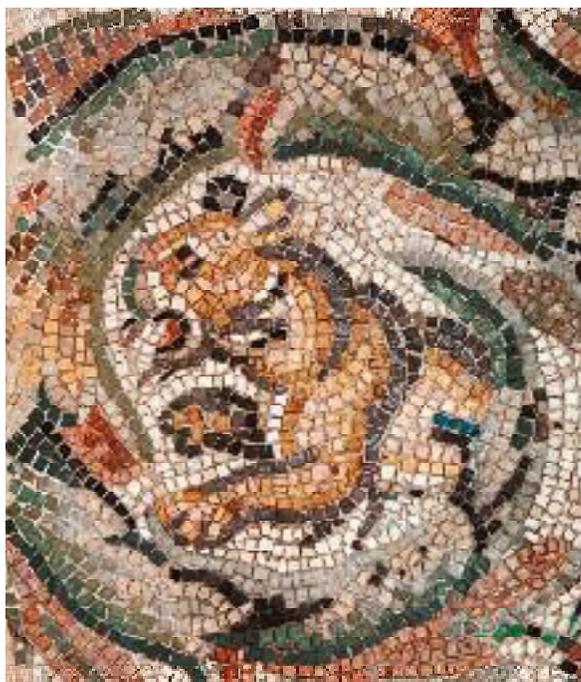


FIGURE 10. *Male head* (detail), Roman, Syria, 4th–5th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 33 ½ x 83 x 1 ½ in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida



FIGURE 11. *Two deer*, Roman, Syria (possibly Cyprus), 3rd–4th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 20 ½ x 36 x 1 in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida

ground lines, is often present. Beginning in the fifth century CE, moreover, rows of animals were often spread freely over the surface to be decorated instead of being framed in neatly defined compartments.¹⁸ One advantage to this less-formal style of mosaic pavement was that it could be adapted to challenging or unusually shaped floor spaces, whether in a domestic or church context.

Over many centuries, a wide variety of subjects became popular, including mythological scenes, literary themes, hunting scenes, depictions of gods and goddesses, pastoral scenes, geometric patterns and designs, and Jewish and Christian imagery. For the Roman

elite who commissioned mosaic artists to create pavements for their palaces, homes, baths, or mausoleums, these pebble, stone, and glass floors became a reflection of their social rank and fervent wish to be regarded as persons of culture, steeped in the artistic, literary, and cultural traditions of Greece and Rome. For the modern viewer, however, they offer a fascinating glimpse into the daily life of ancient times.

John Olbrantz is the Maribeth Collins Director of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.

ENDNOTES

1. For further information on ancient mosaic techniques, see Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* 7.1.1–7.
2. For an excellent explanation of ancient mosaic techniques, see David Neal, “Floor Mosaics,” in *Roman Crafts*, ed. Donald Strong and David Brown (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976): 231–239.
3. For an introduction to the history of ancient mosaics, see Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Roger Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and David Smith, “Mosaics,” in *A Handbook of Roman Art*, ed. Martin Henig (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990): 116–138.
4. For an excellent study of black-and-white figural mosaics, see John R. Clarke, *Roman Black-and-White Figural Mosaics* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).
5. For a superb introduction to a history of the Roman East, see Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
6. For an introduction to Roman mosaics in the Near East, see Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 160–208, and Ling, *Ancient Mosaics*, 49–60.
7. For further information on ancient mosaic artists and their workshops, see Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 269–278.
8. For further information on the ancient mosaic artist’s repertoire, see Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 291–303.
9. For an exhaustive study on the identification of ornamental patterns and geometric designs found in Roman mosaics, see Catherine Balmelle, et al., *Le décor géométrique de la mosaïque romaine. Répertoire graphique et descriptif des compositions linéaires et isotropes* (Paris: Picard, 1985).
10. For a succinct overview on the context and meaning of mosaic floors within the Roman house, see Ling, *Ancient Mosaics*, 113–135.
11. *Ibid.*
12. For a superb introduction to the art, culture, history, and discovery of ancient Antioch, see Christine Kondoleon, *Antioch: The Ancient Lost City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For earlier accounts of the discovery and identification of the mosaic floors of Antioch, see C. R. Morey, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1938), and especially Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 2 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).
13. For further information on the mosaic floors of Roman Syria in general and Apamea in particular, see Janine Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie* (Brussels: Musées royaux d’art et d’histoire, 1977), and Janine Balty, *Mosaïques d’Apamée* (Brussels: Musées royaux d’art et d’histoire, 1986).
14. Information on the history of the mosaics in the Richard Brockway collection was provided in conversations with the collector, October 16–18, 2008.
15. I would like to express my thanks to Christine Kondoleon, the George and Margo Behrakis Curator of Greek and Roman Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for her thoughts on the subject matter and dates of the Brockway mosaics. I am further indebted to Christopher Hallett, Professor of Art History and Classics at the University of California, Berkeley, and Ann Nicgorski, Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Willamette University, for their thoughts on the identity and iconography of the standing male figure.
16. Personifications are discussed briefly in Ling, *Ancient Mosaics*, 54–55.
17. Christine Kondoleon believes that the deer mosaic may be from Cyprus as it is similar to the hunting scenes she published from the House of Dionysos at Paphos. For further information, see Christine Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine: Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994): 271–314.
18. The emergence of animal themes in Romano-Syrian mosaics in the fifth century CE and after is discussed in Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 179–186.

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Front cover: *Male head* (detail), Roman, Syria, 4th–5th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 33 ½ x 83 x 1 ½ in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida

Frontispiece: *Goat* (detail), Roman, Syria, 5th–6th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 31 x 46 x 1 in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida

Back cover: *Goat*, Roman, Syria, 5th–6th century CE, naturally colored stone *tesserae*, 31 x 46 x 1 in. Collection of Richard Brockway, Vero Beach, Florida

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A PASSION FOR THE PAST

FROM THE TIME HE WAS A YOUNG BOY, Dick Brockway ('57) always wanted to be an archaeologist, but when he came to Willamette University from California in the early 1950s he decided to pursue a degree in the natural sciences instead.

Dick had always been good at math and science and had been convinced by his high school teachers that the country needed good engineers. Unfortunately, Willamette didn't offer an engineering degree, and so after three years in Oregon and a BA degree from Willamette he transferred to Stanford University in California, where he earned his BS and MS degrees in electrical engineering.

Still, the lure of archaeology, history, and art never left him, and in the early 1960s he and his friend and college classmate Jim Mercer ('57) spent six months traveling around Europe, where they visited every museum, cathedral, and archaeological site they could find. When their money ran out, Dick returned to California to work as an engineer for General Telephone and Electronics Corporation (GTE).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Dick's work as an engineer and manager took him to various locations in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. He served as a project engineer for GTE in Alaska, England, Italy, Iran, and Japan, where he was able to fuel his growing passion for the past. In addition, he earned a certificate in management from Harvard Business School, adding to his already impressive list of academic credentials.

It was while he was on assignment overseas that he began to assemble his marvelous collection of antiqui-

ties, which includes ceramics, sculpture, mosaics, coins, glass, and lamps from Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China, and Japan. Some pieces were acquired through antiquities dealers in Turkey and Israel, while others were purchased at auction in London and Paris. His collections of ancient glass and lamps, in particular, are among the finest private collections of their kind in the country.

In the early 1990s, after nearly thirty years with GTE, Dick negotiated an early retirement so that he could devote his time to ancient art. He moved from Massachusetts to central Florida and started an antiquities business, Ancient Art International, which he operates from an office in his home. In the late 1990s he returned to Willamette and toured the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, where he was deeply impressed with its collections, exhibitions, and facilities.

Dick made his first gift of artwork to the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in 2000, a number of pieces of South Italian pottery. Over the next decade he donated two Gnathian *skyphoi* to the permanent collection, as well as several pieces of Roman glass, including a stunning pitcher dated to the first to third centuries CE and an amphora dated to the second to fourth centuries CE. These pieces have added immeasurably to our small but growing collection of ancient art.

Although Dick Brockway never became an archaeologist, he has spent nearly forty-five years pursuing his passion for archaeology, history, and art. Through his ongoing gifts to the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, his vision and commitment will clearly inspire future generations of students to pursue their passion for the past.

