Drinking Contest of Herakles and Dionysos

**Date**
early 2nd century CE

**Primary Maker**
Antioch

**Medium**
marble, limestone, and glass tesserae

**Description**
This was the first panel that the guests saw upon entering the dining room of the Atrium house. It was originally flanked by two Dionysiac panels, one with a dancing satyr (Kondoleon catalogue no. 57), the other with a dancing maenad (Kondoleon catalogue no. 56). The scene is of the rarely depicted Drinking Contest between Herakles and Dionysos, which is well suited to the reception function of the room (*1). In the center of the panel is Dionysos, in a light tone of flesh, who turns over his empty cup to show he has won. The triumphant god rests on his elbow propped upon cushions and reclines on a long green cushion (with many, now lost, glass highlights). In contrast, Herakles, depicted in ruddy brownish red tones of flesh, seems tipsy as he leans backwards on his knees, grabs at the drapery around his legs, and lifts the wine cup to his lips. The composition captures the essence of the struggle between mortal and immortal, the elegant repose of the god and the unbalanced human. At the left side of the scene, in keeping with the flanking panels of Dionysiac celebrants, a young woman plays the double flutes in the ears of Herakles. A young boy, an Eros-type figure, rushes with outstretched hand toward Dionysos as if to point out the winner. A Silenos with white hair and beard sits behind Dionysos and raises his right arm in a triumphant gesture. The five figures are convincingly arranged from foreground to background within an interior space characterized by graded areas of light and dark tesserae. The darkest area, almost all of it black, is in the right background behind the seated Silenos. The lighter areas (white and off-white, pale yellows, and grays) are in the foreground and left side of the panel. An array of drinking vessels, including the krater for mixing wine and water, a rhyton, and several drinking cups, are spread out across the middle foreground where they each cast a shadow. Large sections of glass tesserae expand the palette to include red, orange, yellow, and a range of blues and greens (both translucent and opaque). The painterly effects of shadows and spatial recession, not especially well suited to a floor composition, indicate that this mosaic may ultimately derive from a lost painting of an earlier date. The borders framing the three panels at the entrance to the room are from outside in, a band of wave crest (red on white), a meander (black on yellow), a narrow band of stepped triangles (dark red on white), and a two-strand braid (gray and pink). The multiplication of borders enhances the effect of a framed floor painting. (Kondoleon, 2000) *1. Only three other Drinking Contest mosaics are inventories in Auge and Linant de Bellefonds 1986, 524, nos. 104-6.

**Dimensions**
object: 184 x 186.4 x 7.6 cm (72 7/16 x 73 3/8 x 3 in.) framed: 185.4 x 188 x 8.9 cm (73 x 74 x 3 1/2 in.)