



Mosaic of a Vine Scroll Border with Peacocks

Date

526–540 CE

Primary Maker

Roman

Medium

marble and limestone tesserae embedded in lime mortar

Description

This is one of six extant fragments that formed part of the border of a large floor mosaic, nearly 700 square feet in size. The fragments were dispersed to various museums but are here reunited in a computer reconstruction which includes a replication of the interior floral design, rosebuds set against a scale pattern (fig. 1). The other fragments show the continuous vine scroll that grows out of an urn in each corner. Various birds and animals playfully leap within the elliptical compartments created by the turns of the vine. An inside border comprised of twisting ribbon in gray, pink, and yellow is set against a black background. The graded treatment of the colors and the dark background produces a three-dimensional illusion of a fluttering ribbon, which echoes the curves of the scrolling vine. In the Worcester fragment, two brilliantly colored peacocks face a basket laden with grapes. As they are the only peacocks in this border, the mosaicists intended to highlight their importance. In the Roman world peacocks were linked with immortality and eternal life, probably because they shed their tail feathers in winter and renew them each spring. The overall effect of the animated vine scroll bordering a field of scattered rosebuds is one of abundance. Although from a private house in Daphne, this colorful mosaic border offers a vivid example of motifs, inhabited vine, paired peacocks flanking baskets of grapes or wine vessels, which were popular in early Christian art. The motif can be read as a sign of the beauty of God's creation and a promise of salvation. The frequent appearance of vine scrolls in churches and tombs suggests that the words of John 15: 1-5, "I am the true vine ... the faithful are the fruitful branches in the Lord's vineyard," were echoed in such imagery (1*). Scrolling vines filled with the creatures from land, air, and sea, become the central designs for church floors, especially in the fifth and sixth centuries as illustrated by the nave pavement of the Justinianic Basilica at Sabratha, Libya. While the mosaic pavements are the most monumental, the motif of inhabited vines appears on precious objects, such as the Antioch Chalice, and carved into the stone reliefs that covered the vertical surfaces of these churches. For example, the limestone revetment panel with two confronted birds within a deeply cut vine was probably part of an altar enclosure from a sixth-century Syrian church (*2) . Christians must have found in this imagery, repeated in different media throughout church interiors, the signs of God's creation and his deliverance of paradise. (Kondoleon, 2000) *1. A Greek inscription "I am the true vine" accompanies a mosaic of a vine loaded with grapes in the fourth-century Basilica of Chrysopolitissa in Nea Paphos; see Maguire 1987, 10, fig. 3. *2. A deeply cut Greek cross (12 in. high) appears on the reverse. Similar openwork effects can be found on the fifth-century architectural fragments from El Bara, see Strube 1983, 595, fig. 25.

Dimensions

116.8 x 381 cm (46 x 150 in.)