

YOSSI MILO



Modern Antiquity: The Enduring Art of Mosaics

The art of mosaics—the practice of setting thousands of small pieces of stone, terracotta, glass, and just about any other hard material into mortar or plaster—is an ancient yet ever-evolving art form. Simultaneously decorative and functional, the technique spans thousands of years, from the fourth millennium BCE mosaic columns of Sumerian temples in Uruk, Mesopotamia, to the tessellated floor mosaics of Roman villas, to the mosaic masks of the Maya in Mesoamerica, to the ceramic tile mosaics of the present-day New York City subway. Different cultures developed their own approach to making mosaics, often employing materials native to their respective regions to create unique visual and artistic traditions. Today Brooklyn-based artist Cameron Welch is reinventing the ancient art form and pushing the boundaries of his chosen medium by introducing such disparate materials as embedded objects from contemporary culture, glass gilded with foil made for acrylic nails, and reverse glass images of ancient Greek and Roman artifacts.

Cameron's monumental compositions draw inspiration from modern life as well as ancient mythology, art history, and archaeology. The artist first encountered ancient mosaics—specifically Roman mosaics—as a child when visiting different cities in Italy, where he saw them in their original architectural setting as floor pavements. Whether discovered during archaeological excavations of ancient sites or by chance during modern construction projects, many Roman mosaics in Italy have been left in place. Even the remains of an ancient building with a mosaic, uncovered while digging the foundations for the new United Colors of Benetton store in Verona, were incorporated into the modern structure rather than being removed. Now cordoned off but surrounded by clothing racks and sweater displays, such striking (and perhaps absurd) collisions between old and new materials and cultures has had a significant impact on Cameron's work. The impulse to make mosaics himself, however, came about while visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, especially the Greek and Roman galleries, where the seemingly endless variety of ancient artifacts, narratives, and materials just happens to include two large-scale Roman mosaics.

YOSSI MILO

Few objects from the ancient world evoke such an immediate response in the modern viewer as Roman mosaics. There is something about the vibrant colors and textured surfaces, the intricate patterns and dramatic figural scenes, that appeals to our visual and tactile senses. There is also something inherently appealing in the historical dimension, the link established between modern and ancient life through an art form still used and appreciated by numerous cultures today.

In antiquity, mosaics were designed almost exclusively to decorate architectural surfaces. They were utilitarian: hard-wearing and water-resistant. Mosaics made with the now-familiar cut-stone cubes known as tesserae developed in the Mediterranean around the third century BCE and became ubiquitous in the Roman period. By the second century CE, tesserae mosaics covered the floors, walls, ceilings, and any other suitable surface—in public and private buildings alike—across the Roman Empire. Thousands of Roman mosaics remain visible in the landscape today, not only in Italy, but from present-day Spain and France to England to North Africa to Turkey and Syria. The surviving evidence overwhelmingly favors the work of the floor-mosaicist. This is partly an accident of preservation: the first part of a building to collapse, whether in a violent destruction or in a gradual process of dereliction, is the superstructure. The resulting debris, in turn, sealed and protected the foundations, including the floor and any other objects that happened to be in the room at the time. These ruins, eventually buried under layers of soil and vegetation, often sat undisturbed for centuries.

The success of tesserae mosaics, despite the enormous expense and investment of time and labor required to produce them, was in many ways a matter of aesthetics rather than durability. Their principal function was to enhance the appearance of the spaces that contained them. Tiny pieces of differently colored materials could be arranged to produce astonishingly complex and subtle effects. Individual tesserae, through varied coloring, modeling of light and shade, and modulations of tone, joined to create an effect similar to painting. Mosaic floors—like the frescoes with mythological scenes, landscapes, and architectural vistas painted on the interior walls of many Roman buildings—transported the viewer from the confines of a small room to the limitless world of the artist's imagination. Some mosaics were inspired by specific paintings, but most similarities between the two media derive from shared compositional types and visual cues that enabled the viewer to identify well-known figures and narratives without the need for labels. Although individual themes recurred from mosaic to mosaic, the ways in which they were combined, their size and proportion, and their coloring constantly varied. Whatever the specifications in each case, there was clearly enough flexibility for innumerable variations to emerge, undoubtedly reflecting the personal touch of the mosaicist, though few mosaics actually carried artists' signatures.

While they could be laid in all kinds of structures, the majority of Roman mosaics come from private buildings, especially wealthy houses and country villas, a sign of the growing luxury of domestic living. Illusionistic geometric designs, guilloche patterns, and impressionistic vegetal motifs framed dramatic scenes of violent animal hunts, gladiatorial spectacles, and mythological episodes, as well as vignettes of everyday life. Blending art and home décor, mosaics might be designed deliberately to suit a particular part of the building or function of the space. The most expensive pavements—those with a rich variety of colors and elaborate figural scenes—were commissioned to adorn areas for receiving visitors and entertaining guests. Sometimes there is a close relationship between the themes employed in mosaics and the functions of the spaces they decorated. One might find amorous mythological encounters in the bedroom or sea creatures swimming in the bath suites. Dining rooms were often adorned with references to wining and dining, especially scenes of the wine god Dionysus (also known as Bacchus to the Romans) with his retinue of dancing maenads and drunken satyrs. Representations of tables laden with food were also common, and a clever mosaic from a villa in Rome even depicts a floor covered with debris from a banquet that has not yet been swept away. But such a connection is not always apparent. Dining rooms also featured general subjects from heroic legend or romantic myth, or more human pursuits. It seems that Roman homeowners chose themes that asserted their wealth and social status: mythological stories to show off one's sophisticated education and knowledge of literature, scenes of wild animals being captured for fights in the arena to highlight the sponsorship of public games. Personal taste clearly outweighed any desire to make the theme match the setting.

Today ancient mosaics are most often experienced as works of art displayed publicly in museums, typically attached to walls, or roped off on the floor, and certainly not meant to be walked on—an arrangement of

YOSSI MILO

necessity (both for the protection of the object and to save on floor space) but one that misrepresents the ancient viewing conditions. It requires an effort of the imagination, therefore, to experience ancient mosaics in their original architectural setting. Even removed from their original archaeological and cultural contexts, however, these mosaics still offer a vivid picture of ancient Roman life. They are significant not only as art but as evidence of how people lived, worked, and thought. The locations and architectural settings of many ancient mosaics have been recorded over the centuries by archaeologists, helping to illuminate their cultural context. The Greek and Roman galleries at The Met feature two second-century CE Roman mosaics: one excavated at Daphne near the ancient city of Antioch in the Roman province of Syria (present-day Antakya in Turkey), the other from Prima Porta near Rome in Italy. Both mosaics once adorned wealthy Roman villas, but each illustrates a different regional style that developed across the Roman Empire, contrasting the preference for colorful, complex figural scenes in the eastern provinces with the dominant (but not exclusive) style in Italy that used only black and white tesserae for more two-dimensional representations.

The Met's mosaic from Daphne shows the bust of a female figure surrounded by an intricate geometric pattern of embellished squares and diamonds [FIGURE 1]. Different shades of color create the effect of light striking the face from the right, with part of the head in shadow. Most of the tesserae are of marble, limestone, basalt, sandstone, and terracotta, but glass was also used when stones of the requisite color were not available. She wears a flower wreath around her head and a floral garland over her shoulders—typical attire not for a mortal woman but for the personification of spring. Representations of the seasons often adorned the four corners of Roman mosaics, however, and the prominent setting of the bust here evokes a more universal sentiment of abundance and good living. The ancient Greeks and Romans were inspired to bring such abstract feelings to life using allegorical figures, sometimes named in an accompanying inscription but often identified by recognizable attributes. Uncovered during American excavations in the late 1930s, the mosaic once decorated the floor of a private Roman villa at Daphne, a popular resort near Antioch that was famous for its natural hot springs. The Met's mosaic was found together with a second one now in the Baltimore Museum of Art depicting Narcissus, the youth from Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. These lavish mosaics were especially well suited to the luxurious quality of life enjoyed by wealthy Romans at Daphne and Antioch.



FIG. 1

MOSAIC FLOOR PANEL FROM DAPHNE
Roman, second century CE
Stone, tile, and glass; 89 x 99 inches (226.1 x 251.5 cm)
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 38.11.12

The second Roman mosaic in The Met's collection, discovered in 1892, was one of several pavements uncovered in a villa complex near Prima Porta, just north of Rome [FIGURE 2]. Composed of stone and glass tesserae, the overall design of the mosaic is typically Roman, with geometric and floral designs artfully arranged around a central figural panel. Often such panels depict traditional scenes and figures from Greek and Roman mythology. A mosaic found in an adjacent room at the same villa, now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, has, at its center, the head of the gorgon Medusa. The Met's mosaic, however, shows two figures in Egyptian-style dress positioned on either side of a serpent entwined around a basket, holding religious objects as if performing a ritual. A figure with bluish skin wearing a sun-disk with two horns on his head stands before a seated figure with reddish skin wearing a striped headdress with a Uraeus. The head adornments are traditional Egyptian symbols of divinity or royalty, and the unusual skin tones seem to be inspired by colorful representations of gods in Egyptian art. The identity of the figures and interpretation of the scene remains elusive today—and it may not have been so clear even for the Romans, who often adapted images and motifs of other cultures into Roman styles and media.

YOSSI MILO



FIG. 2

MOSAIC FLOOR FROM PRIMA PORTA
Roman, c. 130-150 CE
Stone and glass, 124 1/2 x 124 3/4 inches (316.2 x 316.9 cm)
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 45.16.2

While Cameron's chosen medium recalls ancient visual, artistic, and cultural traditions, the effect of his work is decidedly contemporary, piecing together disparate materials and histories to create new narratives that embody his own personal experiences and identity. His work embraces the materiality and themes of Roman mosaics, while also repurposing them for the contemporary moment. Especially evocative are his *Black Cupid* (2019), *Black Bacchus* (2023), and *Revelry* (2023) [PP. 74, 75, 50–51, 111], all of which envision ancient Roman deities as persons of color. In *Black Cupid*, the winged child-god, made in black tiles, shoots an arrow at a female figure, perhaps his mother, Venus, whose heart quite literally bursts with love. The woman, in turn, is represented with white skin—the pairing of skin colors a comment on the artist's own biracial identity—with Cupid's name tattooed on her arm. Further confirmation of the presence of the artist himself in the work: his cat Lou Lou crouches on the bottom right. It is an intimate and relatively straightforward composition, with Cupid flying against a blue-tiled sky and Venus reclining in a landscape of black and white mosaic patterns. *Black Bacchus* and *Revelry*, on the other hand, confront the viewer with a dense and complex layering of

chaotic images and cultural references. Both mosaics reflect the *horror vacui* of contemporary culture under the guise of the frenzied, drunken rites of the Bacchanalia, a Roman festival celebrating the god of wine, revelry, and ecstasy.

The central figure in *Black Bacchus*, although inspired by the god, is, in fact, a loose self portrait of the artist—the yin-yang symbol in reverse glass on his forehead a recurring symbol in his work that hints again at his biracial identity. Shown here as a winged figure with a heart on his chest, the Bacchus-like character wears a vest made of reverse glass images of not only grapes but also prosciutto and melon, recalling the artist's early memories of Italy. The surrounding scenes evoke the Bacchanalia—with intoxicated revelers and a musician playing a kithara—as well as the madness of Bacchus, alluding to a myth in which the god, driven mad by goddess Hera, is carried across a lake by a donkey (that appears multiple times in the mosaic) to regain his sanity. But the mosaic is not simply a modern expression of ancient history and mythology. The two centaurs at the bottom are not the half-man, half-horse creatures from Greek mythology, known to drink to excess, but are the animated centaurs—one with black skin, one with white—from the original version of the film *Fantasia* (1940). The naked couple on the right are not engaged in orgiastic rites associated with the Bacchanalia but are combined with an African mask to reference Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R.)* (1907), a painting famous for its appropriation of images of African art. The artist also offers some comic relief: in the bottom left corner, the mythological Sisyphus is depicted as a stick-figure pushing a boulder up a steep incline—a nod to the materials used and laborious process of making mosaics.

In *Revelry*, a frenzied Bacchanalia of ecstatic women, drunken revelers, and wild animals—including a pensive, cross-eyed donkey and an oddly amusing foreshortened rabid dog—again surround a Bacchus-like figure. In a moment of humor, one of the dancing women wears the mask from the now extremely dated '90s movie *Scream* (1996), in turn inspired by Edvard Munch's iconic painting of similar name, *The Scream* (1893). This time, the central figure joins his followers, raising reverse glass images of a chalice in one hand and a Roman amphora in the other, thus highlighting both the vessel for drinking wine and the one used to store it. The link with Bacchus is unambiguous: the reverse glass image in the figure's chest depicts not a heart but a bronze head of the young Bacchus from a Roman sculpture (in the J. Paul Getty Museum). If not the god himself, the figure clearly embodies the essence of the deity. Through the use of reverse glass imagery, *Revelry* also creates an explicit dialogue between materiality, ancient art, and contemporary context. The work speaks not only to the mosaic tradition but also more generally to the present-day approach to displaying ancient objects in museums. The reverse-glass images of ancient artifacts such as terracotta vessels and bronze statues reference the way in which we now experience these objects when

YOSSI MILO

displayed behind glass. At the same time, the embedded images also point back to the materials from which ancient mosaics were made, which included ceramic and clay tesserae.

In a sense, Cameron's mosaics invite the viewer to take on the role of a "contemporary" archaeologist (as opposed to the classical archaeologist of the ancient world), excavating multiple histories from antiquity to the present—both in terms of concepts as well as the materials used to create the works. In this role, the viewer must also look to the future, envisioning a time when these mosaics will have entered the realm of "ancient." In Cameron's own words, "I daydream about them being excavated hundreds of years from now, when people will have to gauge what the current moment was like by engaging with the mosaics."

- *Alexis Belis*
Associate Curator of Greek and Roman Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Image: Cameron Welch, *The Genesis*, 2024, 97 7/8" x 121" (248.5 x 307.5 cm)