



The arts past and present

The Astronomer

Jessica Hughes, Classicist

So in this mosaic we've got the kind of image of the learned man that you often see in paintings and mosaics around villas in Italy. And we might see this as advertising the kind of leisure that was going on at the villa. We know that amongst leisure pursuits, particularly valued was learning about the classical past and philosophy and you can tell from this chap's beard, that he's been passed as a sort of archetypal Greek philosopher.

Catherine Parkinson

So what's that in his hand?

David Tomalin, Archaeologist

Well he's in a classic pose. He's holding a pointer, and he's pointing towards a celestial or armillary globe. So he's telling us instantly really that he's an astronomer. And he has other appropriate instruments as well to confirm that, so the tall thing that you see to his right, is a sundial mounted on a tall column and then the object down by his feet is yet another sundial and that's the sort that we often see in gardens today.

The exciting thing is that we now actually know the name of the astronomer. There is a somewhat similar mosaic panel in Trier, and on that one, very helpfully the name of the astronomer has been added by the mosaic artist. And that name is Eurytus. And Eurytus was a Greek philosopher. And he produced a work which was highly respected in antiquity called 'Phenomena'. And this is a poem trying to explain and look for a natural order in the things that he saw around him. And it's very appropriate that he's shown here because the panel fits in with the rest of the mosaic in the lower part of this room. So when first entering the room, the visitor first sees the maritime panel dealing with the sea. And then we see the central panel which deals with the way in which land and the earth is managed. Which leads us to the heavens. And he's also linking panel because what comes to follow in the upper part of the room indeed again, deals with the seasons and the rotation of time. So he's drawing the entire floor together really and linking the themes.

Jessica Hughes

But I think we don't necessarily need to presume that everybody that walks into this room would have got all of that meaning out of these mosaics.

Catherine Parkinson

No. I mean I might have worked out that he was an astronomer. But I wouldn't have had a clue about the rest, just from looking. No.

Jessica Hughes

No. Images are used to create hierarchies and power and symbolic status in antiquity. And this philosopher is really a very good example. Because people would have come in here, and they would have probably realised that this was a portrait of a particular person. They would also have realised that they themselves didn't actually have the cultural resources to say who that was.

Catherine Parkinson

Well that relates to me and what I know about these mosaics as well.