



## The arts past and present

### *Orpheus*

David Tomalin

Here we are looking at the Orpheus mosaic. It's set almost in my view rather like a doormat, and it is indeed just inside the main entrance to the villa. Immediately behind us we have the main triclinium or dining room. So it not only might welcome visitors, but it also leads them deeper into the body of the building itself. Usually we see Orpheus surrounded by concentric circles of animals. It's a wonderful opportunity to show off a whole array of exotic animals and elephants and leopards can be shown. But here, we see only one exotic animal and the other animals are very distinctly British. This is the most fascinating figure of all because it's a monkey. So it's certainly exotic. But I think just looking at this monkey, you can really see that the artist probably have never ever seen a monkey, and was probably only working from sketches or drawings.

The fox seems to be the favoured animal accompanying Orpheus. And you see that in nearly all of the Romano British examples. I wonder if it's actually expressing some of the thoughts and beliefs of the owner himself. Maybe he saw himself a little like Orpheus. Somebody that was cultured and yet living in a rather remote and almost alien world.

Catherine Parkinson

I noticed that the substrate onto which the mosaic is laid is very thin; in this part of the villa I was just wondering why that might be?

David Tomalin

Yes. It's been a mystery to us, and you're right, it's got such an earthy quality to it. It seems to have suffered dreadfully. It looks as though whoever was responsible may have done it in a hurry perhaps. I don't know.

Catherine Parkinson

Yes. I mean from my point of view, from the craftsman point of view, you're mosaic is only ever as good as what it's laid on to. And perhaps if they couldn't get a hold of the right material, they would have to make do with just what they had. If there was a time factor involved they had to do it very quickly.

David Tomalin

Yes. I've often wondered if it was a hasty afterthought, and that maybe it's an insertion in this floor. The rest of the floor is a plain chequer.

Catherine Parkinson

And maybe this was also chequered to start with.

David Tomalin

Yes. And this was sliced in at some point, and perhaps done in some haste maybe.