



The arts past and present

The Medusa

Catherine Parkinson

So here's one I recognise. I think this is Medusa and isn't the myth that anyone who looked at her was turned to stone. Is that right?

Jessica Hughes

That's right.

Catherine Parkinson

And isn't it strange that it's in the middle of the floor.

Jessica Hughes

Yes. You'd think so because it's actually looking out at everyone and probably risking turning us all to stone. You can tell that her head is very suitable for the roundel in the middle of the floor. So that might be a formal reason why she might go in the middle of the room. But also from a thematic point of view, Medusa was known in antiquity to have powers of repelling evil. And in fact there are some stories where even a single lock of her hair was used to turn back entire armies from city walls so she basically became a sort of inverse good luck symbol. And she was used very commonly around Roman houses. What's not so clear is exactly how Medusa distinguished between potential enemies and normal visitors. But I guess superstition never is really easy to understand.

Catherine Parkinson

No. No. So I do have a problem with this particular mosaic. In that to me she looks a bit skewed, like she should be set further round this way. Have you any idea what happened?

David Tomalin

Well it's often been discussed, why she's skewed and there's never been a ready answer for that but there's always been a suspicion that perhaps the Medusa roundel is the work of separate craftsmen and that the giveaway feature seems to be that the border around the outside edge of the image, which is a green limestone and you won't find that anywhere else in the mosaic but we do know that this limestone is a Purbeck limestone from south Dorset. So there's always been a suspicion that perhaps the person that designed and perhaps laid this particular section of the floor was a different person perhaps using their own supplies. Or indeed possibly, even bringing in the whole thing from elsewhere.

Catherine Parkinson

So thinking about it, if I was doing this job, I would actually work indirectly. So I would make my mosaic in the studio, working face down on a piece of backing paper. And I would stick my mosaic down onto the backing paper. And then actually bring it on site, lay cement into the area that I was going to lay the mosaic into, and then flip my brown paper over into the cement, and at that point, if you actually position the mosaic wrongly, then you've had it. That's your one chance to get it right. And that's what it looks like to me. That this mosaic has been flipped over and it's actually been flipped slightly to one side.

David Tomalin

Hearing your view, it's another key piece of evidence really. And it's only really by piecing these various different pieces of evidence together, that I think we'll ever get anywhere near what we would say is probably the archaeological truth. And it's another really vital piece of evidence, in trying to understand the totality of the floor.

