



## The Arts past and Present: Mosaics

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There are lots of Romano-British villas with great selections of mosaics in them but we really wanted just one example that the students could get to terms with and get very familiar with, how the layout was and where the mosaics were, and Brading's a very good example because it's got lots of different kinds of mosaics, and by that I mean it's got scenes that are very familiar, scenes that were represented all over the Empire like Orpheus and the Four Seasons, but it's also got images that are unique in fact, so there's one with a man with a cock's head that only appears at Brading, and it's got very fragmentary mosaics and it also has very well preserved mosaics, so there's a really nice range there, and that meant that we could explore a whole different range of skills that the students might need in approaching mosaics. But we do hope that the skills they learn from this course will be transferable so they'll be able to go to other Romano-British villas and they'll be able to use some of the same approaches as they've learnt during this course when they make their visit, or when they look on the websites.

I mean I think one of the really important things that we wanted to get across on the course was that it's fine for students to have their own opinions about mosaics as long as they can back them up, and so part of what we were doing was giving them directions as to how they might be able to do that so, for instance, by looking in the Roman-Latin literature for accounts of mythological scenes that might give some clue as to how to interpret mosaics, or actually for looking at visual comparanda so other mosaics from other parts of the Empire, so we weren't necessarily giving them the answers to every single mosaic they found, but just giving them clues as to where they might look for those answers themselves. It was very important to stress that identifications of scenes are sometimes contested. A lot of people, their contact with the classical world, will have been in museums or they'd be looking at general text books, and in those contexts you often get written labels that explain an image and there's a full stop at the end, and there isn't really much opportunity for people to realise that this is often a contested identification with a whole history of debate. So I think that when students who've taken this course next go to a museum or read something on the internet, and they see a very matter-of-fact identification they're actually going to take that with a pinch of salt and realise that behind that there is a history of scholars or archaeologists debating what that figure might actually be, or what the scene might actually mean, so it's such an important part of doing archaeology that it really had to be emphasised in almost every single scene that we filmed.

I think that one of the reasons that mosaics were so important and popular in the Roman Empire must be to do with their durability. They were made out of stone, stone itself was a widely available material in all different parts of the Empire, and this durability meant that well they could last a long time, you could spill things on them and wipe them off, and that wouldn't affect the quality of the picture. There's another issue here because when we say that mosaics are important we really have to bear in mind that the fact they were so durable has meant that they've survived where other kinds of material hasn't survived, so wall paintings that might have disintegrated, furniture in wood or other perishable materials, so what we have is actually not a very representative picture of what the Ancient Romans would have had in their houses, and this is something to bear in mind when we go to a villa like Brading that, even though the mosaics might really jump out at us as being very central and important in the villa, when you actually went back to Roman times they were surrounded by all other kinds of material as well so they might not have appeared quite so central.

Another issue is that because they were probably quite expensive only the relatively well-to-do could have afforded these mosaics in the first place, so the question is does that enhance their importance? People in the ancient world might have aspired to having a mosaic in their

house so that might make us think they were very important, but as archaeologists looking back at the past this, in a certain way, limits their importance for us because the only, the mosaics only reflect the aspirations and values of a certain sector of society. One thing that we're very keen to express in the course is that mosaics reflect the ideals and values of the people who chose them and who chose to have them in their houses. Now in the modern world as well when we pick an image, a photo, a poster to have in our houses, whether or not we're not conscious of this at the time we choose it, this is very much reflecting who we consider ourselves to be, and how we want to project an image of ourselves to others. One important difference between ancient mosaics and modern paintings is the fact that once a mosaic's in its place you can't actually move it. So we can move posters round the walls of our house, or take them down if we get fed up of them, but the Romans once the mosaic was in place they couldn't really do anything about that, so this might be one argument for seeing the Romans as thinking very long and hard about what images they chose to decorate their houses, because once they were there, they'd have to look at them for a very long time.

At Brading there's an image of a Greek philosopher and we can tell he's a Greek because of the clothes he's wearing and he's got a beard which in Greek times was often worn by philosophers and other learned men. In the course DVD David Tomalin spoke about this at great length and he showed very clearly how this might have been an image that the villa-owners would have chosen to show their own learning and their intellect. Now the course itself is about leisure and displaying your learning was an important part of leisure for the Romans, so there's this image of learned men gathering together round a dinner table or walking round a garden, and showing off how much they knew about Greek philosophy, so that's an image that does encapsulate I think the value of learning, the value that that might have had for the villa-owners at Brading. One image that really stood out for me was in Room 12 – that's the room whose floor is covered entirely with mosaic so there's lots of different scenes, but the images that really grabbed me were the images of couples – male and female couples that revolved around the central head of the Medusa. These show different mythological narratives, it's not exactly decided which figures these represent, but we have King Liker just killing the nymph Ambrosia, for instance, and maybe Apollo and Daphne, and what was really interesting for me is thinking about how that artist had managed to condense very different and very detailed mythical narratives into such economical images, so each of them is represented just by a man and a woman, and from the symbols that they're accompanied by, things they're carrying and wearing, the viewer can then extrapolate what these scenes might represent. But the fact that they're so economically represented it also introduces this sense of equalness between them, so you look at them, there's four couples, you think how might those be related those stories, so I really enjoyed thinking about how they might be related and I think that maybe ancient viewers would have had the same kind of games.

Something else that comes out very strongly is the sense of ancient gender relations. Earlier I mentioned the mosaic in Room 12 which has the different couples – now in that mosaic, and in other mosaics around Brading, you do see stereotypes about male-female relations reproduced and played out in the mosaic pavement, so in that one mosaic alone we've got images of violence against women, we've got women as erotic objects; there's one lovely scene which has been brought to show an episode in the history of the Trojan war, where Achilles, he's dressed up as a woman, and he's trying to get out of fighting but they play a trick on him, and they sound the alarm for war, the war trumpet sounds, and he blows his cover by immediately rushing and getting weapons, and that's a really nice story, but it also shows this idea that men and women had very instinctive proclivities towards either war or fashion, depending on whether they were men or women.

I think the main point that students are supposed to take away from this course is probably that it's fine for them, in fact it's desirable for them to have their own new ideas. They don't necessarily have to agree with what they see written on museum labels or in text books, as long as they can find evidence to back this up from text or from images, or however they find that evidence it's really great to have their own opinions, and they should feel free and confident to be able to put those forward.

I learnt a lot from filming this episode because we were accompanied by Catherine Parkinson who's a mosaic artist; she's got a studio in London, and she's taught us a lot about the practical side of mosaic-making and things that I'd really never thought about before, so I'd look at a mosaic and I'd immediately think about the iconography, what it represented, but Catherine taught me to see things from a completely different perspective and by putting our ideas together we managed to come up with what's hopefully a fairly rounded idea of what mosaics meant to the Romans, and how craftsmen went about making them.