

The Haralabi Street mosaic

Archaeological Museum of Patras, Greece

Introduction

The Roman Empire left a powerful imprint on the city of Patras and until today excavations reveal evidence of the Roman presence here. In 1985, during a salvage excavation on the ruins of a luxury Roman residence on Haralabi Street, a significant number of mosaic floors came to light. One of these floors stood out due to its distinctive design and large dimensions – features that made it unique. It should be noted that in Roman and Late Roman times Haralabi Street was part of an area with many private and public buildings.

Today, the mosaic is exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Patras (Fig. 1).

Description

The technique that was used for the construction of the mosaic floor is called Opus Sectile and was developed during the Roman era. The method used for the composition of the design was the proper placement of disparate segments of multicolored stones. Because this was a very expensive procedure, it was only used on buildings, temples and luxury residences where the number of mosaics and paintings was insufficient.

This particular mosaic has a geometric design consisting of several shapes which constitute the central patterns. Around these patterns small tiles have been placed in such a way as to form triangles and rectangles (Figs. 2 & 3).

The floor is made of marble slabs, which were cut to a particular shape, either geometric or freehand. The thickness of the slabs ranges from 0.1 – 0.5 m, while the length and width varies from 0.8 x 0.15 m to 0.2 x 0.45m. The artisans of the mosaic exploited the various colours of the marbles and created a rich decorative pattern with colours such as: black, green, purple, white, pink and red with white veins (Fig 4).

The Conservation Procedure

As the first conservation measure, the mosaic floor was detached from the ancient mortar in segments which were placed on wooden boards and then transferred to the Archaeological Museum of Patras, where they were stored (Fig 5).

Several years later, it was decided that the mosaic would be included in the permanent exhibition of the Archaeological Museum of Patras. However, due to the damage that had occurred to the segments during their long exposure to adverse conditions, conservation was considered necessary.

At first, the segments were cleaned on the surface and then each one was washed with water in order to remove the accumulated particulates. Following this procedure residues of the original mortar were removed from the rear of each piece with the use of tools (Fig. 6).

Lastly, the tiles from the five central patterns were secured with new mortar which was reinforced with an aluminum frame, while the remaining pieces were left unchanged (Fig. 7).

Composition and Exhibition of the Mosaic

The complexity and uniqueness of the mosaic floor made its composition a difficult and demanding process for the conservators. In order for them to deliver a proper result, they drew the shape of the mosaic on a new surface in real dimensions (Fig. 8) using as a guide the drawings and few photographs from the excavation. Through this procedure, all the tiles were placed in the correct position (Figs. 9 & 10) and secured there with mortar at their base (Fig. 11).

After this mortar had solidified, the joints were filled with more mortar and lastly, the surface of the mosaic floor was cleaned (Fig. 12).

Conclusions

At first glance, it could be said that the overall impression given by the freestyle and asymmetric design of this marble floor is that the work is naive and not of artistic value. However, the aesthetic experience brought to us results from the combination of materials used, the quality of the stones, the interplay of the colours, the simple geometric patterns, none of which are exactly the same. So great is the variety of motifs that they break the rules of symmetry and harmony – dark and light colours in strong contrast show us the spirit and the power of the artist. The result is a unique floor and the patron was no doubt satisfied with his commission.

With only a few old photos from the excavation for guidance, the conservator needs experience, love of the object, patience and persistence in order to rebuild and restore such a unique work of art.

