



North Coast of Africa, Carthage

*Geometric wreath mosaic* mid-late 4th century AD

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**Geometric wreath mosaic** mid 4th century – late 4th century AD

stone, mortar

98.3 x 146.8 x 2.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 2006 (2006.33)

Mosaic is one of the most durable art forms to survive from the ancient world with one of the longest continuing histories. With antecedents in the decorative pavements of small coloured pebbles found in the ancient Near East as well as Greece, tessellated mosaics – consisting of small near-cubic pieces of stone (tesserae) laid in a bed of plaster or mortar – first appear in Greece in the Hellenistic period, between the third and second centuries BC. Adopted by the Romans, they are found in quantity across the Roman world and continue in use into the Early Middle Ages with only minor changes in their structural character. Because of their durability, mosaics show developments and changes in style and composition over a thousand years, whereas other mediums, like painting, did not survive largely.

The form of the NGV mosaic, a self-contained design in a clearly defined panel, is typical of threshold panels that were laid in the doorway to a room, abutting larger panels of floor mosaic. Geometric designs or unidirectional, linear foliage designs were typical patterns employed in threshold panels. The NGV mosaic may, on stylistic grounds, be attributed to a North African workshop, perhaps in the vicinity of Carthage, the laurel wreath interlace being a motif known from mosaics from at least the second century AD in this region and particularly associated with the workshops of Byzantium. The design contains laurel chains interlaced in a guilloche (a decorative design in which two or more curved lines are interwoven, forming a series of spaces between them) pattern defining circular medallions. A central row of eyelets containing heavily stylised krater (an ancient Greek vessel made of either bronze or clay for mixing water and wine) and acanthus (a stylised motif derived from the large leaf of the acanthus plant) separates the two rows of medallions that surround cruciform floral rosettes. These cruciform rosettes suggest a Christian influence. With the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire from the fourth century onwards, the cross motif assumed a particular significance.

The city of Carthage where the NGV mosaic originated was destroyed by Roman forces in 146 BC. From 29 BC the city was rebuilt as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar and his heir, Octavius. Carthage became a major trading port for grain and olive oil produced in North Africa and by the fourth century AD was the second largest city in the western empire after Rome itself.

*Matthew Martin*

## Costa norte de África, (Cartago)

**Mosaico de guirnalda geométrica**, segunda mitad del siglo IV d.C.

piedra, argamasa

98,30 x 146,00 x 2,50 cms

Galería Nacional de Victoria, Melbourne

Adquirido en 2006 (2006.33)

El mosaico no es solamente una de las formas artísticas más duraderas, sino también la que cuenta con una historia más larga y continuada. Con antecedentes en los pavimentos decorados con cantos coloreados que encontramos en el Oriente Próximo y en Grecia, los mosaicos, consistentes en piedras casi cúbicas (tesserae) colocadas sobre una base de escayola o argamasa, aparecen inicialmente en la Grecia helenística, período que se extiende entre el siglo III y II a.C. Adoptados por los romanos, aparecen frecuentemente en todos los lugares ocupados por el antiguo Imperio de Roma y su uso continúa, con cambios mínimos, hasta principios de la Edad Media.

Por su durabilidad, constituyen una fuente importante para el estudio de la composición y el estilo pictórico, figurativo y ornamental a lo largo de un período continuo de miles de años, mientras que otras manifestaciones artísticas, especialmente la pintura, no sobreviven mucho tiempo.

El diseño del mosaico de la NGV, contenido en un panel claramente definido, es el típico que se colocaba en el suelo del umbral de las salas, colindando con otros paneles de mosaico más grandes. Los diseños geométricos o unidireccionales y los diseños lineales de hojas eran utilizados generalmente en los paneles de las entradas. El mosaico de la NGV, por su estilo, parece provenir de un taller del norte de África, probablemente cercano a Cartago, ya que la guirnalda de laurel entrelazado es un diseño empleado en los mosaicos de esta región por lo menos desde el siglo II d.C. y asociado particularmente a los talleres de Bizancio. El diseño es de cadenas de laurel entrelazado en guilloche\* formando medallones circulares. Una hilera central de ojete con estilizada crátera\* y hojas de acanto\* separa las dos hileras de medallones que circunscriben rosetas florales cruciformes. Las rosetas cruciformes han hecho pensar en un posible significado cristiano de este específico diseño. Con la paulatina cristianización del Imperio romano a partir del siglo IV, el motivo de la cruz asume un significado mayor.

La ciudad de Cartago, de donde proviene el mosaico de la NGV, fue destruida por los romanos en 146 a.C. A partir del año 29 a.C. fue reconstruida como colonia romana por Julio César y su heredero, Octavio, convirtiéndose en el mayor puerto para el comercio de grano y aceite de oliva producidos en el norte de África; en el siglo IV d. C. llegó a ser la segunda ciudad del imperio después de Roma.

\*Guilloche: diseño decorativo en el que dos o más líneas curvas se entrelazan dejando una serie de espacios entre ellas.

\*Crátera: antigua vasija griega de bronce o de barro en la que se mezclaba el agua con el vino.

\*Acanto: estilizado dibujo derivado de la hoja del acanto, originado en Grecia. Fue adoptado por los romanos y llegó a convertirse en un elemento decorativo primario del arte clásico.

## Thinking and discussing before the visit

- At the time this mosaic was made, both Carthage and Spain were part of the Roman Empire.
- Mosaic is an art form that has been used by many cultures throughout history from ancient times until today.
- Research the history of mosaics using libraries and the internet.
- What function did they have during the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and what materials were used to make them?
- Create an engaging visual poster that explores the variety of images used in mosaics. Consider geometric designs, symbols and characters from Greek and Roman mythology.
- Why have mosaics from the ancient world survived longer than other artefacts from this period?
- Write an article for a design magazine that describes in detail a mosaic from the past or present that you particularly like. Describe its location, function, design, colours and materials. Incorporate photographs or your own drawings and diagrams.

Spain was under Roman dominance from 218 BC to AD 414, and extensive Roman architectural remains and some mosaics and fragments of mural painting can still be found in the country.

- Research the following archaeological sites using libraries and the internet:
- Itálica, close to Seville, in Andalucía is one of the largest Roman sites in Spain. The town was the birthplace of many famous Romans, including the emperor Hadrian.
- Carmona, also close to Seville, contains impressive archways and mosaics in a necropolis and amphitheatre.
- The villa at Río Verde, Andalucía has outstanding examples of mosaic floors.

<http://www.juntadeanandalucia.es/cultura/museos>

<http://www.juntadeanandalucia.es/cultura/museos/CAI>

## Gallery visit activities

- Have you seen or made a mosaic? What materials are used by contemporary artists who work with mosaics?
- What materials has the artist used to make this mosaic? Discuss why the artist's choice of materials was limited in Roman times.
- Estimate how long you think it would have taken to cut each cube of stone (*tesserae*). What tool might the artist have used?
- What do you see in the mosaic design. Describe the objects and shapes you recognise?
- You may not recognise the leaves of the acanthus plant and the krater, (an ancient vessel for mixing water and wine), repeated in the centre of the design. Artists often stylise images like this in mosaic, textile or graphic designs.
- Discuss the meaning of 'stylise'. Where can you see examples of stylised motifs in contemporary design?
- Look carefully at the overall design. Consider how circles are used in the design. How is the design principle of repetition used? How does the design show movement?

Discuss the meaning of the word 'mosaic'. List all the places you might see a mosaic. Consider archaeological sites, museums, art galleries, modern architecture and sculpture in public places.

In what ways can mosaics from the past contribute to our knowledge of history?

Motifs are sometimes used in design to symbolise meaning. What symbols can you think of in our everyday lives that suggest meaning? Consider a heart, an arrow or the peace sign.

## Gallery visit activities, continued

- What type of lines can you see in the design? Find evocative words to describe them such as curvaceous, swirling. How would the atmosphere of the mosaic change if all the lines were straight?
- What mood does the palette of different coloured stones suggest? Consider what materials and colours you might have chosen if you were making this design.
- What might the cross and the laurel wreath used in this mosaic symbolise?
- Discuss the meaning of the expression 'resting on one's laurels'.

## Post-visit activities

- Investigate the Pre-Columbian (of the period in the history of the Americas before Columbus arrived in AD 1492) Mayan and Aztec mosaic masks that incorporate precious jewels. Discuss the purpose of the masks and the materials used to make them.

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/aoa/m/mosaic\\_mask\\_of\\_quetzalcoatl.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/m/mosaic_mask_of_quetzalcoatl.aspx)

- There were different degrees of *Moorish* occupancy in Spain from 711 to 1492. This Arab influence played an important part in the development of Spanish art and architecture.
- Research the Alhambra, (built between 1333 and 1391), the former palace and citadel of the Moorish kings of Granada, and one of the greatest monuments to Islamic mathematical art on Earth.
- The Alhambra is famous for its mosaics created with tiles arranged in intricate geometric patterns. What particular feature makes these Islamic designs different from some mosaics seen in Christian cultures?

Spain is famous for its modern mosaics.

- Research the giant mosaic sculpture created by Joan Miró (1893–1983), entitled *Dona i ocell*, Catalan for *Woman and bird*. It can be found in Barcelona in Catalonia.
- In what ways is mosaic useful as a means of decoration in the practice of sculpture and architecture?
- Imagine that you are a mosaic artist commissioned to make a highly original mosaic for an area in a school or school grounds. You may want to consider your own school.
- Decide on a theme and think about imagery that might evoke it. How might you stylise that imagery in a design? What colour scheme would complement the design?
- Think about the processes involved and the problems you would need to solve in the construction and realisation of your mosaic. Consider context and scale. What materials might you use? Communicate your ideas for the design in a series of drawings and collages that you could present to your client.

In antiquity, the laurel wreath was a symbol of victory or excellence. Where do images of the laurel wreath or words based on 'laurel' appear today?

Research the tessellating designs of Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898–1972), who is regarded as one of the world's most famous graphic artists. Why do you believe he was greatly inspired by the mosaics at the Alhambra, which he visited in 1922?

<http://www.alhambra-patronato.es/>

<http://www.mcescher.com>

Follow link to: Picture Gallery 'Symmetry'

Research the mosaics in Parc Güell and Casa Batlló, Barcelona created by Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926) the famous Catalan architect.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpu091Ue0zA&feature=related>

<http://www.gaudidesigner.com/uk/parc-guell.html>