



# A Setting Worthy of the Lady

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David Wheelock

Nearly 2,000 years ago, this graceful mosaic graced the dining room floor of a seaside villa in southern Turkey. Today it is the object of admiration for visitors to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

solvents, Bria painstakingly cleaned the darkened mosaic and re-set some of the original tiles.

In addition to its enhanced appearance, those acquainted with the mosaic will notice another major change: its size. Shortly after its acquisition by the University, the mosaic was cut into what was believed to be two pieces so it could be brought to the second floor of the old Stovall Museum. Rumor has it that members of the OU wrestling team were recruited to hoist the 1,200-pound slabs to the upstairs gallery. The pieces were laid together on the floor and roped off for exhibition.

In the late 1990s the museum carpenter, looking for a place to store equipment in Stovall's Building Six, came across a crate that contained a huge surprise for the museum staff. "It was a third piece to the original mosaic," exclaims Droke, who also serves as repatriation specialist. "We had never looked for it, because we never knew it existed. But once we began going over old records, we realized this was indeed a part of the Antioch mosaic."

Droke speculates that the long vertical piece on the left side had been cut away simply to make it smaller and to highlight the figure of Cilicia. "It still shows the damage done from time and close proximity to the sea, but we are thrilled to have all three pieces reassociated. Our goal was to conserve, not restore," she says. "We don't want it to look brand new. It is an archeological treasure and should be treated that way."

The lady of the mosaic couldn't agree more.

She has suffered many indignities throughout her lifetime. She has been walked on, ravaged by time and sea winds, and nearly cut in two, but at last the lady has what she deserves: a well-appointed corner in a fabulous new home where soft lights illuminate her face and figure.

The central figure in the museum's nearly 2,000-year-old Antioch mosaic is being seen as never before thanks to a recent discovery and some TLC from museum registrar Julie Droke and two nationally known conservators. For the first time since its acquisition by the University of Oklahoma in 1950, the mosaic is not being exhibited on the floor, but on a wall of its own in the Gallery of World Cultures.

Centuries ago, the mosaic adorned the dining room floor of a luxurious seaside villa. The location was a realtor's dream, overlooking a Mediterranean harbor town in what is now Hatay, a province of southern Turkey. Sparring no expense, the owner commissioned designer touches throughout the house. The mosaic floor was especially sophisticated for 100 A.D., representing not only strong geometric patterns, but also delicate feminine figures, presumably of local river goddesses, trees, and a bird in flight.

"Composing a mosaic floor like this was an extremely labor-intensive venture," explains Claire Dean, a Portland, Oregon, conservator, who served as consultant on the project. "You must start with several bedding layers, as if you were building a road. There were scores of people who would work on a panel like this. Apprentices would do the repetitive borders, then master craftsmen would come in to do the more intricate work of the human figures."

A major misconception is that the mosaic is constructed from painted tiles. "Not so," says Dean. "What you are looking at are precise quarter-inch squares that have been cut from colored stones. They have been extracted very carefully using a wedge and a tool similar to a geologist's hammer."

The figures of a mosaic are brought to life, not with a brush, but from the skillful positioning of the tiles. The colors used in the Antioch mosaic were very progressive for its day, employing a 19<sup>th</sup> century Impressionistic technique of juxtaposing light and dark colors to give the figures life. The mosaic contains not only the darker tones of browns and black, but also a lighter palette of rose and lavender, olive green and gray. Resurrecting those various shades was the job for Carmen Bria Jr., a conservator from the Western Center for the Conservation of Fine Arts in Denver.

"I spent about 50 hours on it," says Bria. "Somewhere along the line, someone had put varnish over it. It was literally brown." Using a cotton swab and organic

