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## HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

## ORPHEUS

### A ROMAN MOSAIC FROM AFRICA

“Die So-geliebte, dass aus einer Leier  
mehr Klage kam als je aus Klagefrauen;  
dass eine Welt aus Klage ward, in der  
alles noch einmal da war: Wald und Tal  
und Weg und Ortschaft, Feld und Fluss und Tier;  
und dass um diese Klage-Welt, ganz so  
wie um die andre Erde, eine Sonne  
und ein gestirnter stiller Himmel ging,  
ein Klage-Himmel mit entstellten Sternen-:  
Diese So-geliebte.”

R. M. RILKE, ORPHEUS. EURYDICE. HERMES.

The first and only antique mosaic piece in the Collection of Antiquities was found in Tunisia in the 1940's. Its owner moved to France towards the middle of the century, and it was from here that the item made it into the international art trade and thence recently to the Museum of Fine Arts. The central region of North Africa, the province *Africa*, was one of the richest parts of the Roman empire. The agricultural production of its huge estates played an essential role in the empire's food-supply. The intellectual elite of the region took an active part in the cultural life of the

empire – M. Cornelius Fronto, the tutor of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) hailed from North Africa, likewise the still popular second century writer, Apuleius, and such great minds of emerging Christianity as Tertullian (2nd–3rd century) or Saint Augustine (354–430). Up to the Arab conquest in the seventh century, the art of the region was inseparable from the Graeco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean: *Africa* constituted an organic part of the Hellenized artistic *koiné*; nevertheless, it did preserve some characteristic features going back mainly to the Phoenician-Punic tradition, whose influence had not ended after the destruction of Carthage (146 B.C.). Hence the appearance of the figure of Orpheus, one of the best known heroes of Greek mythology, in the African mosaics of the third and the fourth centuries.

Mosaic work most probably appeared in several parts of the Mediterranean not later than in the Classical period of Greek culture – one of these places was North Africa. Mosaic work was a complex and varied craft with many different branches (depending on whether mosaics were used on floors, vaults or walls) and techniques: e.g. the pebble mosaic invented in the Classical period, *opus tessellatum* made use of tesserae of regular shapes (see the Budapest item); *opus vermiculatum*



employed millimetre-size tesserae, rendering even the brushwork of the painter almost perceptible; *opus sectile* used irregular marble chips and was characteristic of the art of late antiquity. The different regions of the vast Roman empire produced different stylistic variants – Italian mosaic work was predominantly black and white, whereas the works of art from *Africa* and *Syria* were characterized by polychromy.

The pattern was often traced on a bed consisting of layers of increasingly fine grain – in the Budapest piece the white tesserae of the background follow the contours of the figures closely, whereas in other places they are arranged in regular rows. Most of the mosaics made in the Imperial period were designed for the floors of villas, and the ornamental motifs often hinted at the function of the room (one of the best known pieces of antiquity is a mosaic showing the floor of a dining-hall after a feast, full of discarded scraps of food).

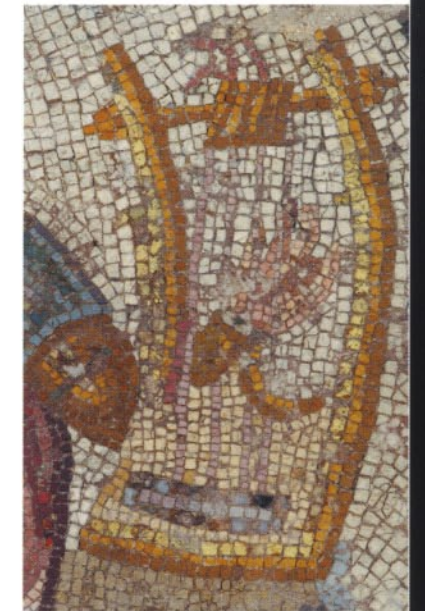
This arched hexagonal mosaic, now in a modern bronze frame, shows Orpheus as an exotically dressed, handsome young man, sitting on a rock. The songster-hero wears two tunics, a long-sleeved one (yellow) and a short-sleeved one (green); a cape, thrown across his left shoulder and covering his left leg, is held together by a *fibula* or brooch on his right shoulder; he also wears form-fitting hose and shoes. There is a Phrygian cap on his head; on his wrists he wears bracelets inlaid with turquoise and emerald-coloured stones. With his left hand he is plucking a four-string *kithara* held close to his body, in his right hand there is a yellow plectrum. There is a laurel-like tree beside him with a songbird of coloured plumage in it. The borders of the picture are decorated with broken meander designs. The tesserae are complemented by several glass pieces.

This mosaic comprehensively illustrates the stylistic polyphony of the art of the Imperial period. It follows the unbroken tradition going back to the Hellenistic period, which, defying the fundamental characteristics of mosaic work, tries to produce an unbroken surface out of millimetre-size tesserae fitted together with slight gaps, and, competing with the art of painting, aims to create a painterly image. The same need appears clearly in the representation of depth in the picture (Orpheus's right arm is more forward, so the right sleeve of his tunic is light yellow, whereas the left sleeve is ochre-coloured), and the fine gradations of colour in the delicate shades of the face, eyes, and the fingers plucking the lyre. The dark brown streaks in Orpheus's hair, however, are reminiscent of the chiaroscuro effect that came into predominance in Roman sculpture at the end of the 2nd century; the shaping of the face with its sweeping planes also belongs to the artistic idiom of the late antiquity.

Orpheus, the son of Apollon and the Muse Calliope, is the *par excellence* poet of Greek mythology. Orpheus



accompanied the Argonauts in their quest for the Golden Fleece, and was capable of calming the stormy seas with his song. He was most renowned for descending to Hades to reclaim his dead wife Eurydice. With the magical power of his song he obtained the release of his wife from the gods of the underworld, still, he did not succeed in taking her back into the human world. His head reputedly gave prophecies even after his death. His music charmed the beasts of the wild – this scene is often depicted in Roman mosaic work, with Orpheus in the middle, surrounded by animals listening to his song. This composition must have appeared in the Budapest mosaic, too.



The figure of Orpheus turned into a popular motif in mosaic work, especially from the beginning of the third century, the era of late antiquity, when, following the death of Marcus Aurelius (180), the crisis of the empire and classical Graeco-Roman culture became manifest. By this time the figure of the hero had been enriched by some additional features – not all based on Greek mythology. This happened in the first place because from the Archaic period onwards Orpheus's name had been inseparably entwined with that of a Greek spiritual movement which tried to ensure the otherworldly happiness of the soul – the idea having been identified as one of Orpheus's teachings. When catching sight of the mosaic in its original place, presumably

on the floor of one of the halls of a big *villa*, the ancient onlooker – just like us – surely had to consider all possible interpretations of the image of this handsome youth: the one who descended to the underworld in search of his love and lived to return; the one who controlled the forces of nature with the magic of his music; and the one who knew the secrets of the *kosmos* and came to be a role model for people. This is indicated by the fact that Orpheus's figure was taken over by the art of early Christianity as one possible way of representing Christ.

The significance of Orpheus did not wane with the passing of the Graeco-Roman world. His figure became a source of inspiration in Monteverdi's opera, Liszt's symphonic poem (*Orpheus*), Rilke's poem (*Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*) and Kosztolányi's short story (*Hrusz Mária csodálatos látogatása*), to mention only a few of the great works of art composed on this theme.

NAGY ÁRPÁD MIKLÓS