

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Unknown Roman artist

Mosaic of Lion, 6th century C.E.





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Stone and mortar, $1\frac{5}{8} \times 42\frac{1}{4} \times 29\frac{5}{16}$ in. ($4.1 \times 107.3 \times 74.5$ cm).
Museum Collection Fund, 05.18

Description of the Artwork

This mosaic depicts a wide-eyed lion standing in a garden or a forest clearing. The image is made of many tesserae, or small tiles, of black, gray, orange, red, yellow, green, and white.

About the Artwork

The mosaic was once part of a tiled floor in an ancient synagogue in Hamman Lif, Tunisia, in Northern Africa. A local Jewish woman commissioned the floor, which used images of flora and fauna to represent Paradise, in the sixth century. At the time, Tunisia was under Roman rule. Although Roman emperors such as Honorius (393–423) and Theodosius II (402–450) declared that Jews could build no new synagogues in the Empire, there was little enforcement of these decrees, especially in regions that were some distance from Rome. In addition to Tunisia, remains of synagogues from the Roman Empire have been found in Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary, and Italy.

The synagogue floor was unearthed accidentally in 1883, over a thousand years after it fell into disuse. The French ruled Tunisia at the time, and French soldiers found the floor while digging a garden. That discovery led to the beginning of synagogue archaeology. Since then, 150 other ancient synagogues have been identified in the region of the Mediterranean Sea.



La Mosaique de Hammam-Lif, 1884

Printed illustration, 8 × 12 in. (21 × 30 cm). Brooklyn Museum

Questions for Viewing

Describe the object. What is the lion doing?

How does he appear to be feeling? What details do you observe on his face or body that are expressing these feelings?

How many different colors of tiles did the artist use? Describe the different shades that you see.

Where does the lion appear to be? Describe the setting. Is he in the wild or in a more civilized environment such as a garden or town?

What ideas or qualities might lions stand for or symbolize? Why might the artist have chosen to decorate a place where people go to pray with an image of a lion?

The image in this packet is a fragment of a larger mosaic floor. What do you imagine the rest of the floor looked like? Compare your predictions to the sketch of the floor (see left) made at the time of its discovery.

Classroom Activities

Art and Writing

Write a description of this art object from the point of view of the lion. If you were the lion, what would you see? How would you feel? What would you say? What time of day is it? What time of year is it? What are your hopes or fears?

Art Making

The lion is only one of many animals that were depicted in the mosaic floor. The artist also included other animals of the land (rabbits and bulls), sea (dolphins and fish), and air (geese and ibises). Find photographic images of these animals or images from the art of other ancient civilizations such as Egypt or ancient Rome. Use these images as a model and create your own mosaic using small pieces of construction paper and glue sticks. Glue your small colored paper squares to an 8½ by 11-inch sheet of construction paper. You may wish to add different examples of plant life to your mosaic as well.

Social Studies

The ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans all incorporated lions into their sculpture, painting, ceramics, and architecture. These civilizations often associated the lion with power, kingship, protection, and bravery. Collect and examine images of lions from ancient art. Be sure to include examples from several different periods of history. You may draw or copy images that you find in books and magazines or on the Internet. (One site about symbols of the lion in Jewish art is www.jhom.com/topics/lions/art.htm.) You may also find myths and legends that have lions in them. Compare and contrast different cultures. Present your research to a family member or a classmate.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview/

The Brooklyn Museum's online, searchable collections database indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.





Pesce, Caporal au 83° del et pinac

Imp. Lemercier & Co Paris

MOSAÏQUE DE HAMMAM-LIF.
Vue d'ensemble.