

Roman Floor Mosaic from Tunisia
(II-III Century A.D.)
Presented by His Excellency Habib Bourguiba,
President of the Tunisian Republic
to the National Gallery of Art, May 4, 1961

The mosaic was discovered at El Djem, the ancient Thysdrus, in Tunisia. It represents symbols of the god Bacchus (the Greek Dionysios) in his various aspects as god of wine, god of the theater, and the god associated with the rebirth of nature in the spring.

Such symbols were revered in the mosaics of Roman Africa because of the protective qualities attributed to them.

The symbols appear in spaces marked off by a loose grid of peacock feathers and garlands, framed in a braided border. In the two spaces nearest the center are a male and a female figure caught up in a frenzy of worship. There are a bacchant and a bacchante, votaries of Bacchus. The symbols in the other spaces are birds on flowering twigs, satyr masks, a dulcimer or bagpipe, a many-reeded flute, a tragedian's mask, and a cantharis vase filled with fruit.

Such symbols are particularly characteristic of the mosaics made in the region of El Djem, in the province of Byzacenia. Tunisian mosaics, especially those of the Byzacenan school, exerted a tremendous influence abroad, notably in Sicily, Algeria, and Spain.

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