



Review

Drawings of Roman Mosaics in the Topham Collection, Eton College Library. By P. Witts. BAR international series 3064. BAR Publishing, Oxford, 2021. Pp. xvi + 193, illus. Price £48. ISBN 9781407358987 (pbk); 9781407358994 (PDF eBook).

Spectacle and Display: A Modern History of Britain's Roman Mosaic Pavements. By M. Dawson. Archaeopress Roman archaeology 79. Archaeopress, Oxford, 2021. Pp. vi + 246, illus. Price £40. ISBN 9781789698312 (pbk); 9781789698329 (PDF eBook).

The history of the recording and display of mosaics is a fascinating subject and two very different books have considerably contributed to our understanding. Michael Dawson's book is quite far-ranging, looking at the changing attitudes towards mosaics and their display from the sixteenth century to the present day, while Patricia Witts focuses microscopically on one important collection of mosaic drawings.

Patricia Witts' research into Roman mosaics has involved her delving into various archives and illuminating in print the early recording of mosaics, and this work on the mosaic drawings and prints in the Topham Collection is particularly noteworthy. The life of Richard Topham (1671–1730) and how his vast collection of drawing and prints, etc., including those featuring mosaics, came to be in Eton College library are examined in Chapter 2. The mosaics featured in the collection, all illustrated in colour where appropriate, are mostly those displayed or found in and around Rome during Topham's lifetime. His principal artists were Francesco Bartoli (1670–1733), whose works are considered in Chapters 3–4, and Gaetano Piccini (1681–1736), in Chapter 5. While Bartoli's paintings are mostly versions of earlier ones, Piccini drew mosaics found near Rome, now lost, and are the only record of them. They were illustrated as if the artist were copying a painting rather than a mosaic, sometimes with a grid reflecting tessellation but not accurately representing it. The lives and techniques of these and the other artists represented are examined in Chapter 9. Each painting is described minutely, its subject matter examined and its importance assessed. The work ends with a detailed catalogue, including a bibliography for each entry, index and eight appendices tabulating various aspects of the paintings.

For students of Roman Britain, the drawings and prints of mosaics from Britain are of particular interest (Chapter 7). All but one, found in the bishop's garden, Chichester in 1727, are known from other recordings, although some in Topham's collection are superior. In particular, William Webb's pen-and-ink and watercolour drawing of the Bacchus mosaic at Stonesfield, Oxfordshire is a revelation. It was executed shortly after the mosaic's discovery and gives a better idea of its appearance than near-contemporary engravings and embroidery, although it has been rather overshadowed by later recordings, more accomplished but less accurate. Webb's painting shows that the mosaic has far more in common with the famous Woodchester Orpheus pavement than had been previously realised.

This book is a valuable contribution to art history and Roman mosaic studies. Witts is certainly thorough in her research and her writing is impeccable, and one feels that no stone was left unturned. The illustrations are good and well-sized – so often published illustrations of mosaics are too small to appreciate properly – although they would have looked so much better printed on higher-quality paper.

Michael Dawson's interest in the fate of Romano-British mosaics stems from the exposure and subsequent history of the Bellerophon mosaic at Croughton, Northamptonshire. He provides a valuable account of the treatment of mosaics after their discovery and their exhibition, from the eighteenth century, by aristocrats and antiquaries who, like Richard Topham, were inspired by the discoveries of ancient art and architecture in Italy. They exposed mosaics, either to be protected by cover-buildings or moved into their stately homes (Chapters 2–3). The nineteenth century saw a more commercial facet creep in to sites with mosaics, and the advent of public museums and guide-books reflecting a more general interest (Chapter

4), while twentieth-century display was increasingly in the care of local authorities and national organisations – the ‘professionals’ (Chapter 5). There are several detailed case studies of cover-buildings, including Fishbourne, Bignor, Brading and Chedworth, which are full of interest. Also considered is the evolution of museums from cluttered repositories of curiosities to stark display spaces with mosaics treated as works of art in a gallery, from antiquarianism to commercialisation. It makes fascinating reading.

Much is thought-provoking and a valuable contribution on how we should regard mosaics and their display, but it is also sometimes rather opinionated. Speaking of the cover-building at Brading, for instance, Dawson claims the modern cover-building has ‘removed a sense of relationship between mosaics and ancient building’ (p. 175). The same disparagement is aimed at the latest cover-building at Chedworth. As only a few courses of the Roman walls at Brading survive, the relationship between mosaics and ancient building has long been lost. A cover building must not only protect the mosaic from extremes of temperature, rising damp, algal growth, trampling feet, etc., but also allow it to be viewed by the public. Mosaics are always going to be seen out of context and any display has perforce to be a compromise. Although this reviewer does not agree with all that is written, one has to respect Dawson’s daring to question policies towards the display of mosaics in cover buildings and museums, and one can empathise as the heart can sink sometimes at the ‘dumbing down’ that goes on to ‘engage with the paying customer’. But nowadays, sadly, in many cases the mosaics will only be displayed if it is economically viable to do so.

Although the book has much to commend it, it is marred by the sheer number of careless errors. On the first two pages alone there is: ‘Bellerophon the winged horse’ (instead of Pegasus); ‘Edward Woodward’ credited as creating, with his brother, the replica of the Woodchester mosaic, mistaking John Woodward for the famous actor; and the transfer of Littlecote from Wiltshire to Berkshire. Claiming only 30 pavements were reburied (there are a dozen at Woodchester alone), a single mosaic on display at Colliton Park, Dorchester when there are five, does not fill one with confidence. Sadly, the other 244 pages are also peppered with errors. At least seven different site-names are misspelt. ‘Cyparissus’ on a mosaic from Leicester becomes ‘Cypresses’ (p. 210); ‘Cypress’ (p. 36) and is mistaken for ‘Actaeon’ (p 32). The scholars Peter Johnson and David Johnston are hopelessly muddled. Tortuous phraseology abounds and there are passages which almost defy understanding. The book would have benefited greatly from copy-editing and proof-reading to remove errors and typos such as a glaring one on the back cover: ‘Deptartment of Continuing Education’.

This is a shame, but should not detract from the important points that the book makes. It is well researched, with blow-by-blow accounts of the development of important sites threaded through its chapters. It forms a veritable catalogue of real or perceived shortcomings in the presentation of mosaics in museums and on sites throughout the ages, including the present. The 60 figures are largely devoted to showing mosaics in the context in which they are or were displayed. Although the presentation of these ancient floors to the public is bound to be a compromise, it should always be the best one; awareness of the past treatment of mosaics is a very necessary prerequisite, and this book provides ample evidence for good and bad practice.

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