



Timeless Mosaics

By M. Stephanie Chancy + Kenneth Silver + Marie-Louise Silva Stegall

[Editor's Note: The 2016 exhibitions of a Roman mosaic floor from Lod, Israel and documentation of Hans Hoffmann's rare exploration of mosaic wall murals at the FIU Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum in Miami have caused us to consider examples of the role of mosaics over the past two millennia. So we asked art historian M. Stephanie Chancy to comment on the "Lod Mosaics," NYU Professor of Modern Art Kenneth Silver to comment on Hans Hoffmann's mosaic murals, and the daughter of artist Pedro Pablo Silva to comment on the mosaic structure surrounding and protecting Grant's Tomb that her father created.]

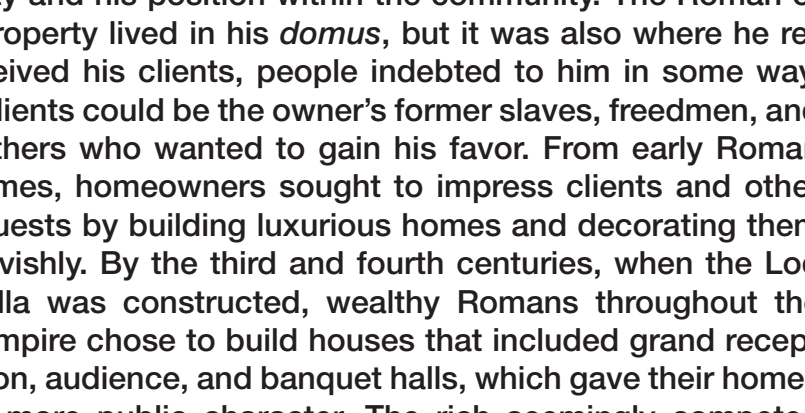
ROMAN MOSAIC FLOOR FROM LOD, ISRAEL



Roman Mosaic from Lod, Israel, Roman, c. 300 CE, excavated at Lod (Lydda), Israel, stone tesserae. Photo © Israel Antiquities Authority.

Miami is an art city populated by museums and galleries both small and large. As someone who teaches art history, I encourage my students to venture out and see art face-to-face, and, if they like modern or contemporary art or works from Latin America or the Caribbean, the opportunities for such interaction in South Florida are plentiful. Although my teaching touches on more recent artistic periods, it mainly focuses on Ancient Greek and Roman art, which are not as easy to find in the Miami area. Because of the fragility and rarity of pieces from ancient eras, they hardly ever leave their home institutions.

The Lod Mosaic exhibition at the FIU Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum includes a large carpet mosaic, the so-called "North Carpet," which has previously visited the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Hermitage, among others. What makes the South Florida exhibition special is the addition of the "Vine Scroll," a wide band, or *frieze*, which was part of the mosaic series unearthed in 1996. Until now the "Vine Scroll" has never left Israel. I have read about the Lod mosaics and had, of course, looked at photographs. I had not seen the pieces in person until I walked into the gallery where they are displayed. Several things struck me the first time I stood before them. I was amazed by their size, awed by the intricacy and detail, and overwhelmed by a sense of history and authenticity.



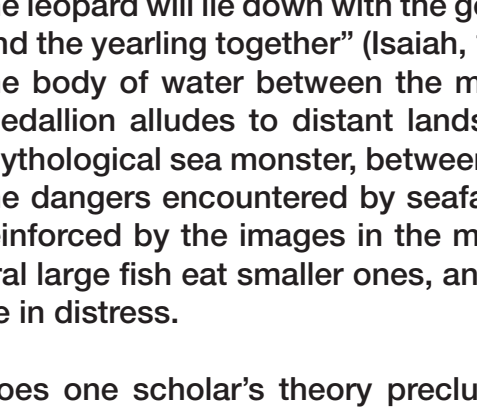
Roman Mosaic from Lod, Israel (detail), Roman, c. 300 CE, excavated at Lod (Lydda), Israel, stone tesserae. Photo © Israel Antiquities Authority. Installation shots: Photo courtesy of the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum.

The "North Carpet" and "Vine Scroll Frieze" were excavated from a large Roman villa in central Israel. The villa and mosaics date between the third and fourth centuries CE, which corresponds to the period of the Late Roman Empire. Lod was probably in its prime during that epoch. Beyond a few mentions in rabbinical texts, however, there is little documentary evidence about the city itself, which was called Lydda in the ancient period and Diospolis by the Romans. Sitting as it did along several busy roads, Lod/Lydda/Diospolis was populated by residents and visitors of diverse backgrounds. The villa was built and the mosaics installed about a century after the city had been elevated to the status of Roman colony, likely reflecting a process of Romanization. It was the practice to introduce the finer aspects of Roman life to the Empire's colonies and holdings, no matter their proximity to or distance from Rome, the center and métropole.

Mosaics are some of the best-preserved type of Roman art and examples have been found wherever the Romans conquered. It is an old art form that was popular in both ancient Greece and Rome. It had humble beginnings with early examples often simply featuring pebbles pressed into clay or plaster. These types of mosaics were seen as an affordable and durable way to decorate a floor. By the Roman era, mosaics were just as durable but had become more prestigious and much more costly. They were used to decorate high traffic areas like baths and markets while Romans of the elite also utilized them to ornament their homes. The Lod mosaics were placed in what might have been a dining area, large reception hall, or banquet hall. Though the room's exact function remains a mystery, it was definitely one of the villa's public spaces.

The Lod Mosaic's "North Carpet" is very large — 50 x 27 feet. Its extensiveness may not register until one actually stands in front of it. Remarkably, this big "carpet" is entirely constructed of tiny pieces of rough-shaped cubes called *tesserae* set in a fine mortar. *Tesserae* were made of marble, stone, tile, or glass, and measured between three-sixteenth of an inch to nine-sixteenth of an inch. It comes as no surprise that mosaics like the "North Carpet" required an inordinate amount of time to execute. They were also expensive since the master mosaicist and his assistants had to work on site. Once completed, however, a mosaic required little special care and could be expected to last a lifetime. Because of the expense and longevity, the patron was very particular in choosing what was to be depicted. Popular subjects in the Empire included scenes of daily life such as hunting, fishing, circus races, and gladiator games. Mythological scenes were also prevalent. Not only were myths timeless and familiar, they also reflected the patron's knowledge, education, and sophistication. When commissioning a mosaic, the goal was for the design to express the owner's affiliations within the structure of the Empire.

In Imperial Rome the house, or *domus*, and the art within it were intended to make clear the owner's social identity and his position within the community. The Roman of property lived in his *domus*, but it was also where he received his clients, people indebted to him in some way. Clients could be the owner's former slaves, freedmen, and others who wanted to gain his favor. From early Roman times, homeowners sought to impress clients and other guests by building luxurious homes and decorating them lavishly. By the third and fourth centuries, when the Lod villa was constructed, wealthy Romans throughout the Empire chose to build houses that included grand reception, audience, and banquet halls, which gave their homes a more public character. The rich seemingly competed with each other to see who could build the most elaborate, multifunctional home with the most opulent decorations. The grand villa and impressive mosaics uncovered at Lod may indicate that the owner was engaged in this sort of contest.



Roman Mosaic from Lod, Israel (detail), Roman, c. 300 CE, excavated at Lod (Lydda), Israel, stone tesserae. Photo © Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo courtesy of the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum.

The designs in both the "North Carpet" and "Vine Scroll" are set against a white background, with the primary focus on animals. Many of the featured animals were those traditionally seen in the arena during spectacles. Arena spectacles were important in the Empire and were often sponsored by the wealthy. Since Lod did not have an arena, scholars speculate that the focus on animals usually seen in this context illustrates the patron's attempts to show his participation in Roman culture. It was essential for people living in the provinces and the colonies, particularly the wealthy who had political power, or aspired to it, to stress their connection to Rome. Establishing these links often took visual form.

The Lod Mosaics show artistic influences from different areas of the Empire. Mosaics similar to the "North Carpet," which can be viewed from different positions, were traditionally seen in the Empire's western region, geographically modern-day England, France, the Iberian Peninsula, Germany, and Italy. The medallion on the "North Carpet," arguably an *emblemata*, a central design surrounded by a border, derives from Hellenistic Greek examples. Some of the strongest influences come from Roman North Africa. This includes the marine theme and focus on animals, which may be indicative of hunting or arena games. Also stemming from North African models are the central medallion's landscape with no indication of depth and the arrangement of animals as though placed on separate registers, or levels. Similarly, the braids, or *guilloches*, separating the different niches also seem to come from North Africa. The artist and the patron both favored an *all over composition*, meaning the design elements spread across the entire surface, which also denotes North African influences. This combination and adaptation of different artistic traditions are considered characteristic of Roman art.

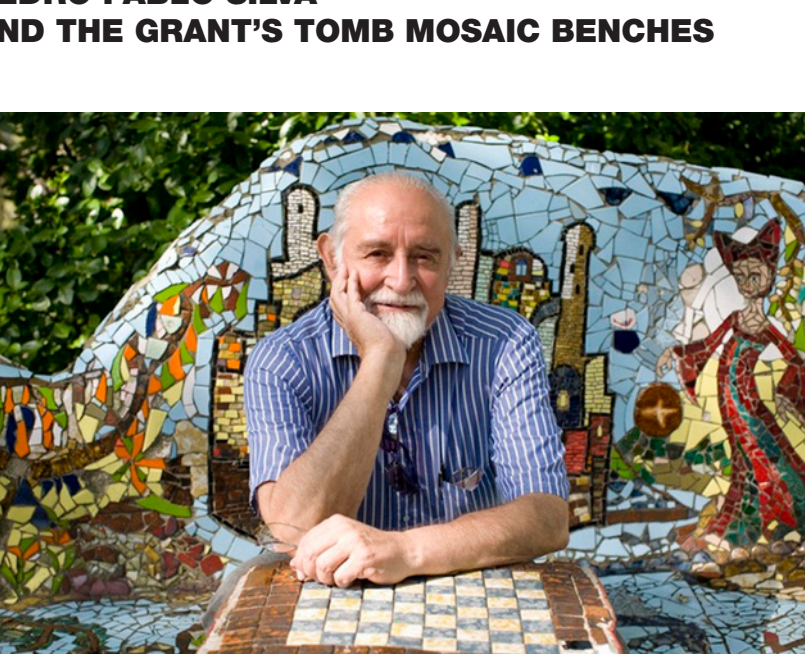
Photographs from the excavation indicate that the "Vine Scroll" *frieze* separated two large "carpets," the North, which is on exhibit, and the South, which has never left Israel. The frieze was a later addition and scholars are unsure why it was commissioned. In such instances were often used to indicate doorways, but in this border led to a theory that the two larger mosaics were once in separate rooms and a wall was removed to make a larger space. Because the "Vine Scroll" repeats many of the iconographic motifs seen in both carpets, it served to unite them. The *frieze* features a large *krater*, a vessel used to mix water and wine, which is flanked by two peacocks. The "North Carpet" echoes both the *krater* and peacock motifs. An extensive vine scroll extends from the *krater* on the *frieze* and, within its branches, birds pluck at the vine's leaves and clusters of fruit. In contrast to the earlier "North Carpet" the "Vine Scroll's" design is less fluid and natural.

The Lod Mosaic is considered unusual for several reasons: no human figures are included, land and sea animals are combined, and there are no overt references to religion. With no inscriptions or documentary information very little is actually known about the patron. The dearth of evidence has not prevented scholars from speculating. In formulating their theories they turn to the mosaic, the one source available to them. What it reveals, however, is different for each scholar. Christopher Lightfoot, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for example, saw references to Dionysus, the pagan god of wine. The *Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York, for example, saw references to Dionysus, the pagan god of wine. *kraters* certainly lend credence to this premise. Glen Bowersock, retired professor of ancient history from Princeton University, saw a connection to the biblical Book of Isaiah in the central medallion where predators and prey share a landscape in harmony: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together" (Isaiah, 11:6). It is my belief that the body of water between the mountains in the central medallion alludes to distant lands and that the *ketos*, a mythological sea monster, between the mountains signals the dangers encountered by seafarers. This seems to be reinforced by the images in the marine panel where several large fish eat smaller ones, and one of the boats may be in distress.

Does one scholar's theory preclude or negate one proposed by another? Rina Talgam, an art historian from The Hebrew University, says no. She proposes that the different elements were meant to generate conversation among the villa's visitors. Moreover, as Talgam points out, Lod's population was composed of people from disparate backgrounds, some pagan, others Jewish, and still others Christians. Thus an individual's understanding of the iconography depended on his or her cultural background. So when you stand in front of the Lod Mosaic's "North Carpet" and "Vine Scroll," be amazed by their size, be awed by the intricacy and detail, and be overwhelmed by a sense of history. But don't forget to have a conversation with your companions about what it all means. You will then perhaps be doing exactly as the patron intended.

— M. Stephanie Chancy

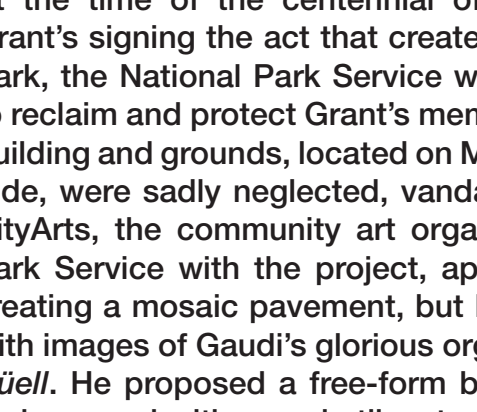
HANS HOFMANN'S MOSAIC MURALS



Detail, Hans Hofmann mosaic at 711 Third Avenue elevator lobby, New York, NY.

In 1950, when Samuel Kootz, Hans Hofmann's art dealer, held an exhibition at his gallery titled "The Muralist and the Modern Architect," he introduced Hofmann to the architectural team of Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener. For the exhibition, the team collaborated on a project for a new public space in the Peruvian city of Chimbote. Sert and Wiener were already at work on a design for the city, and they asked Hofmann to contribute murals for the bell tower and plaza walkway.

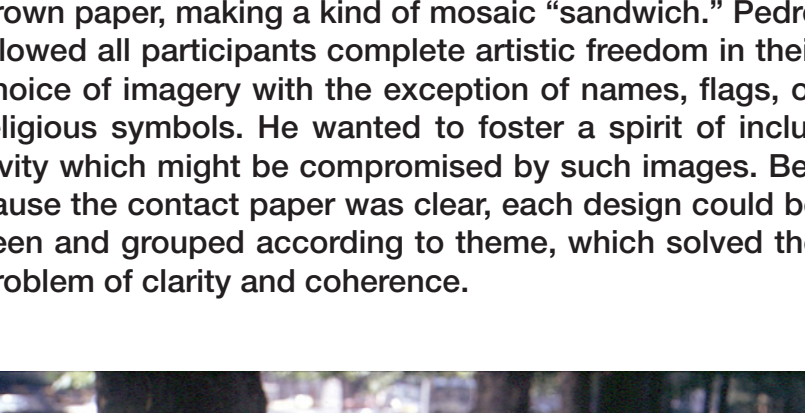
Instead of the usual sketches and drawings, Hofmann produced ten large-scale paintings, which he referred to as mural studies and which are today known as the Chimbote Series. These works were to be executed as murals made of glass tiles. No easy feat. The project was never realized, but it gave the artist an opportunity to think about public artwork. He later created two beautiful murals that were made of glass tiles, both in New York City, his adopted home.



Hans Hofmann mosaic, 711 Third Avenue lobby and elevator bank, New York, NY, 1956.

The first of these was created in 1956 for the lobby and elevator bank of 711 Third Avenue. The architect William Lescaze wanted to add the strength and warmth of the arts to an office building that was designed to provide the ultimate in comfort and facilities. Hofmann integrated his work into the structure of the lobby, creating an incredible immersive experience.

The second public project was a commission for the New York School of Printing located at 439 West Forty-Ninth Street. The building was designed by Hugh Kelly and B. Sumner Gruzen in 1958 and was a new model for public school buildings. Hofmann created an exterior mosaic mural spanning sixty-four feet near the entrance to the school. Though simpler in design than the 711 Third Avenue project, the structure and format of the mural purposefully lead students and faculty to the courtyard to enter the building. The artist later referred to this work as the "bowtie on the building."



Hans Hofmann mosaic, New York School of Printing, 439 West 49th Street, New York, NY.

These two mural projects were the only public works Hofmann created, and we are fortunate they remain in their original locations. Taking on the task of working in a different medium, on a grand scale, expanded his approach in his later art practice.

— *Walls of Color, The Murals of Hans Hofmann* by Kenneth E. Silver

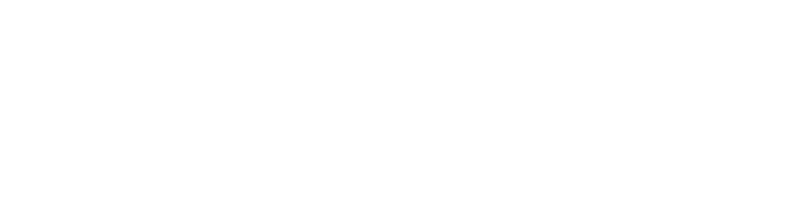
PEDRO PABLO SILVA AND THE GRANT'S TOMB MOSAIC BENCHES



Pedro Silva (1934-2013), Medieval Bench, General Grant National Memorial, New York, NY. Photo: Konrad Fiedler.

In the summer of 1971, the Silva family took an epic journey over Europe. For two and a half months, the five of us — my father Pedro, mother Valerie, me, and my siblings Tony and Rondi — meandered through eight countries immersing ourselves in sights, sounds, and tastes. Most of all, we ravenously devoured the incredible art and architecture — from Roman ruins to medieval icons to Rococo palaces to Renaissance masters. But it was Gaudi's Park Güell in Barcelona that changed Pedro Silva's life.

For several years prior to the trip, Pedro had been working on public art projects in some of the most impoverished neighborhoods of New York City. Most of the work was building cement playground sculptures with the direct participation of the children and families in the neighborhood. Pedro witnessed how powerful it could be to engage people who had little of their own in the act of creating art. They felt a sense of ownership and pride in bringing an object of beauty to their community. These sculptures were not just inert objects to be passively viewed, they were meant to be used actively for climbing and play, becoming essential resources for local children.



Grant's Tomb in the Fog, 2016. New York, NY. Photo: John Briswell

At the time of the centennial of President Ulysses S. Grant, the National Park Service wanted to do something to reclaim and protect Grant's memorial tomb. The tomb's building and grounds, located on Manhattan's Upper West Side, were sadly neglected, vandalized, and in disrepair. CityArts, the community art organization tasked by the Park Service with the project, approached Pedro about creating a mosaic pavement, but Pedro's mind was filled with images of Gaudi's glorious organic structures in Park Güell. He proposed a free-form bench, made of cement and covered with mosaic tiles, to surround three sides of the memorial. The project began in the summer of 1972. It was meant to be finished in a couple of months, but Pedro's greatly expanded vision took three years. After the first year, CityArts was no longer involved and Pedro worked directly with the National Park Service. He had a team of artists working with him, and most of them stayed with the project.

The benches presented a significant challenge—as far as we knew, no one had ever tried to do such a large participatory piece in such a challenging material. How could each individual work be created, saved and then mounted on a concrete bench in a way that made artistic sense?

Pedro invented an innovative and resourceful technique. Each person was given a piece of brown paper approximately one-foot square and asked to draw a design like a cartoon. Next, participants cut tile pieces to fit the design—a bit like filling in a jigsaw puzzle. The tile pieces were not the neat squares of classic tesserae — they were bathroom or pool tiles that had been donated for the project. They came in many shapes, sizes, and colors. Pedro's "rule" was that the tiles should be broken into organic and irregular shapes which added to the lively texture of the completed work. When the person had finished filling in the drawing with the colorful shapes, the completed mosaic piece was covered with a piece of clear contact paper, which stuck to the tile pieces and to the edge of the brown paper, making a kind of mosaic "sandwich." Pedro allowed all participants complete artistic freedom in their choice of imagery with the exception of names, flags, or religious symbols. He wanted to foster a spirit of inclusivity which might be compromised by such images. Because the contact paper was clear, each design could be seen and grouped according to theme, which solved the problem of clarity and coherence.

Applying mosaic tiles, Rondi Silva in background, 1974. Photo: Pedro Silva.

Pedro's technique was embraced by a blend of professional artists (many of whom serendipitously discovered the project and donated their time), children, college professors, and even local gangs—in fact, by anyone who wanted to join the over 3,000 people who eventually participated in the project. All the pieces found a home on the benches and today, when you visit Grant's Tomb, you will often overhear a parent or grandparent proudly pointing to an image and saying, "I made that!"

The resulting work is a gorgeous explosion of color and vibrancy that remains beloved by the community and inviting to visitors. In the words of renowned art critic Arthur Danto, "It is without question the greatest folk-art complex in New York, and perhaps in America." Danto calls the benches, "a gift to the world — an audaciously realized monument magnificently sited and filled with the kinds of surprises children love to discover in picture books."

The *Grant's Tomb Benches* are about 350 feet long and have 17 sections. They are connected and sinuous, some facing toward the Tomb, and others outward to the Hudson River. Some of the benches are in the shapes of their subjects — faces, bodies, automobiles, creatures. The *Lovers' Bench* may be the most popular and has been the backdrop for many wedding photos.

Detail from Grant's Tomb Benches, 1975. Photo: Pedro Silva.

Many of the original donated tiles were not meant to be used outdoors, and had worn away or chipped over time. However, the basic structure remained strong, so in the summer of 2008, my brother Tony worked with our father to repair and restore the benches. And the good news is that the community that helped create the benches now helps to protect them. As a result, they have not suffered from graffiti or vandalism over the years. (Tony will be working on the restoration of another of Pedro's projects this summer, the Sea Serpent in Nashville, TN.)

Pedro P. Silva, Grant's Tomb Bench, 1975. Photo: Pedro Silva.

Revisiting the *Benches* so many years later prompted many memories for our family. It was a delight to go back and spot the particular images each of us created—my mother Valerie as an accomplished artist in her own right and the siblings at ages nine, ten, and eleven.

The *Benches* represent the best of that turbulent time in our history. They remind us that art can bring disparate people together with a common purpose and a shared sense of beauty and harmony. More than an extraordinary work of art on a monumental scale, the *Benches* are a beacon of hope and tangible proof of our shared humanity.

—Marie Louise Silva Stegall