

The Conservation of the Roman Mosaics in the Museum of Sousse, Tunisia: Between Doctrines and Practices

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Abstract : Mosaic is a part of a broad universal cultural heritage; sometimes it represents a rather essential source for the researches on the everyday life of some of the previous civilizations. Tunisia has one of the finest and largest collections of mosaics in the world, which is essentially exhibited in the Museums of Bardo and Sousse. Restored and reconstituted, they bear witnesses to hard work. Our paper deals with the discipline of conservation of Roman mosaics based on the proceedings of the workshop of the Museum of Sousse. Thus, we highlight two main objectives. In the first place, it is a question of revealing the techniques adopted by professionals to handle mosaics and to which school of conservation these techniques belong. In the second place, we are going to interpret the works initiated to preserve the archaeological heritage in order to protect it in present time and transmit it to future generations. To this end, we paid attention to four Roman mosaics currently exhibited in the Museum of Sousse. These Mosaics show different voids or gaps at the level of their surfaces and the method used to fill these gaps seems to be interesting to analyze. These mosaics are known under the names of: Orpheus Charming the Animals, Gladiator and Bears, Stud farm of Sorothus and finally Head of Medusa. The study on the conservation passes through two chained phases. We start with a small historical overview in order to gather information related to the original location, the date of its composition as well as the description of its image. Afterward, the intervention process is analyzed by handling three complementary elements which are: diagnosis of the existing state, the study of the medium processing and the study of the processing of the tessellatum surface which includes the pictorial composition of the mosaic. Furthermore, we have implemented an evaluation matrix with six operating principles allowing the assessment of the appropriateness of the intervention. These principles are the following: minimal intervention, reversibility, compatibility, visibility, durability, authenticity and enhancement. Various accumulated outcomes are pointing out the techniques used to fill the gaps as well as the level of compliance with the principles of conservation. Accordingly, the conservation of mosaics in Tunisia is a practice that combines various techniques without really arguing about the choice of a particular theory.

Keywords : conservation, matrix, museum of Sousse, operating particular theory, principles, Roman mosaics

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