

Connoisseurship, Wall Mosaics, and the Trained Eye Today

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The ancient and medieval wall mosaics that have reached us are relatively few, most already identified, and only visible from a distance on the monuments they were meant to decorate. Some of them also appear in collections and museums, and a few, especially those without a certifiable provenance, have proven to be fakes. To the trained eye, the differences between originals and fakes are clear and seldom ambiguous. Unfortunately, the trained eye is a rare commodity nowadays, even among professionals. Often, to distinguish between fakes and originals, curators seek reassurance from restorers, who understand “materials” and can, for example, analyze and presumably date glass mosaic cubes (a methodological fallacy, because the composition of glass itself is a matter of multiple elements, of which very few have chronological value).

One example should suffice: the mosaic head discovered at Talygarn in Wales (Fig. 1) in 1986, now in the Lauder Collection in New York. It represents a bearded, middle aged man, set against a golden ground and framed in an oval medallion. The head sold at auction at Sotheby’s in 1987 after being correctly connected with the Torcello west wall mosaic of the Last Judgment by Robin Cormack.¹

Cormack’s identification with one of the Apostles of the west wall was possible because of the abundantly illustrated report published following the first Corpus campaign in 1975 at Torcello: the report included pictures of the apostles, some published here for the first time (e.g., the head in position A12, a nineteenth-century copy of the Talygarn original).²

Still, Cormack’s attribution of the head was wrong on all levels other than its provenance: iconographical identification (with Thomas/Philip, rather than with James the Less/Bartholomew), dating (the mosaic shows three periods: the original eleventh-century, a twelfth century repair and a nineteenth-century one, see my chart, fig. 2, not understood by Cormack) and the history of its repairs (attribution to Moro rather than to the Salviati team, twenty years later).³

The Corpus for Wall Mosaics in the north Adriatic Area (of which only the Torcello fascicle has been completed after the defection of Dumbarton Oaks from its

¹ R. Cormack, “An apostle mosaic from medieval Torcello,” Sotheby’s European Works of Art, Sculpture and Metalwork. Sale cat. London, Thursday July 9th, 1987, London, 1987, lot 64.

² I. Andreescu, “Torcello. III. La chronologie relative des mosaïques pariétales,” Dumbarton Oaks Papers 30 (1976), 246-341.

³ Cormack, as in note 1; Andreescu-Treadgold, “The Real and the Fake: Two Mosaic Heads from Venice in American Collections,” Studi Veneziani, 36 (1998), 279-300; *ead.*, “Two Mosaics from a Last Judgment Composition,” in The Glory of Byzantium Exhibition Catalogue, Helen Evans and William Wixom, eds., New York (1997), 452-53 and *ead.*, “The Christ Head at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Apse in the Bode Museum, Berlin, and Other Fake Mosaics,” in New Light on Old Glass: Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass, Chris Entwistle and Liz James eds., London (2013), 271-290.

obligations)⁴ is the methodological instrument that should be used to assess the production of wall mosaics in the Veneto and elsewhere. For the numerous gains in information derived from the Corpus, I refer the reader to several recently published articles.⁵

Scholars should resist the outdated practice of issuing “stylistic” judgments without closely examining the artifacts in context. Suggestions based on a superficial knowledge of these artifacts are almost always wrong and lead even today to damaging conclusions.⁶

⁴ For the Corpus, and its beginnings, see Andreescu, “The Corpus of wall mosaics in the North Adriatic area,” Bulletin de l’AIEMA VII, 1978, 317–23. Publications based on the research for the Corpus include: Andreescu-Treadgold, “Il Corpus dei mosaici parietali nella zona nord Adriatica e la campionatura delle tessere vitree del III registro della parete ovest a S. Maria Assunta di Torcello (I),” in IX Colloquio dell’Associazione Italiana per lo Studio e la Conservazione dell’Mosaico (AISCOM) Aosta, 2003, Ravenna, 2004, 175–90; ead., “Il Corpus dei mosaici parietali nella zona nord Adriatica e la campionatura delle tessere vitree della parete ovest a S. Maria Assunta di Torcello (II): gli altri registri,” in X AISCOM Lecce, 2004, Ravenna, 2005, 617–36; and Andreescu-Treadgold and J. Henderson, “Glass from the mosaics on the west wall of Torcello’s basilica,” Arte Medievale, 2, 2007, 87–140.

⁵ Andreescu-Treadgold, “The Mosaics of Venice and the Venetian Lagoon: Thirty-five Years of Research at Torcello” Arte medievale, IV S, III, 2013, 193-206.

⁶ For such an example see Cormack, “Viewing the Mosaics of the Monasteries of Hosios Loukas, Daphni and the Church of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello,” in New Light on Old Glass (as in note 3 above), 242-253.

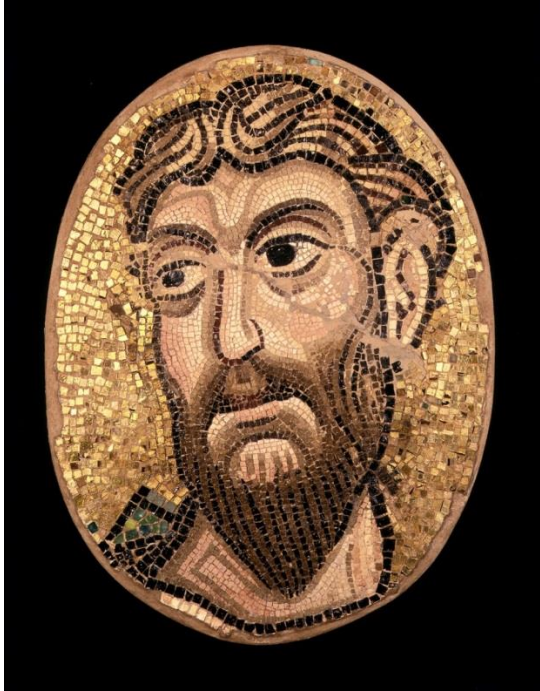


Figure 1. Mosaic head discovered at Talygarn in Wales
Lauder Collection, New York.

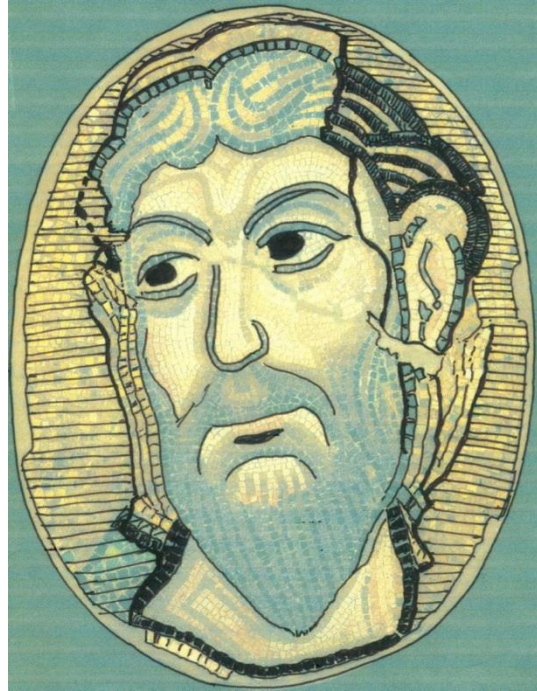


Figure 2. Diagram of Restorations