

The Getty Bear Hunt Mosaic: Past, Present, and Future

Kenneth Lapatin, The J. Paul Getty Museum

In 1972, the J. Paul Getty Museum acquired from a Zurich dealer a large, fragmentary, late Roman mosaic depicting a bear hunt (72.AH.76). Consisting of 23 concrete-backed sections reinforced with rebar, it was said to have been in an Italian collection before the Second World War. The mosaic was promptly described by Norman Neuerburg (1973: 53-4, no. 113), who published it without photographs. He attributed it to North Africa, an attribution supported by David Ball (1984), who was particularly interested in the treatment of space and the possible source of the visual motif, which he believed to derive from illustrated texts of Pseudo-Oppian's *Cynegetica*.

Partially preserved and measuring approximately 6.61 x 8.69 meters, the mosaic depicts four hunters, two anonymous, the others named *Lucius* and *Minus*. Three are well preserved, but of *Minus* only the left arm and both hands are visible. The men, all wearing boots and sleeved tunics, drive five bears into a large semi-circular net tied to a pair of trees. This scene is bordered by a colorful double guilloche, and, at the right side, a long, straight laurel festoon. A continuous outer border consists of an exuberant acanthus rinceau inhabited by fruits, armed, dueling erotes, and the protomes of real and imaginary animals. Two preserved corners take the form of large faces enveloped in acanthus, rather like personifications of Seasons, but apparently not differentiated. These are arguably the most attractive parts of the mosaic.

Unknown to Neuerburg, Ball, and others at the museum, the mosaic had been unearthed in June 1901 in the environs of Baiae, near the Lago di Lucrino, in the area of the so-called *Stufe di Nerone*. It was examined in-situ by Italian officials, who declared it to be of no artistic or financial value. Ettore Gabrici described it in some detail in *Notizie degli Scavi* (1901), but did not provide photographs. Decades later, it was published by Italian archaeologists (e.g., Boriello and D'Ambrosio 1979: 44) who knew it only from Gabrici's early notice and archival images, unaware that it had been acquired and published by the museum.

The Campanian provenance of the Getty Bear Hunt mosaic was first recognized by Klaus Werner (1994: 293, nn. 22-23; see also Cima 1998: 436-8) and has recently been explored more fully through the archival research of Maria Stella Pisapia (2014): it was sold by the landowner in 1906 with approval of the Italian ministry, partially lifted, and intended to be installed in the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome. Instead, it was transported to Naples where it was warehoused before being resold in 1929. Meanwhile, four additional panels not lifted at the beginning of the century, including the body of *Minus*, were illicitly removed from the site. These were subsequently recovered and eventually deposited in storerooms the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (inv. 11474-11477; see Pagano 1983-84; Pisapia 2014).

Unaware of both its true provenance and existence of the four Naples panels, Ball estimated that about three-fifths of the mosaic were preserved at the Getty. Gabrici,

meanwhile, had suggested that the mosaic was originally at least twelve meters long, but compositional elements suggest to the present author that it may have been even larger than previously thought. Further study is needed, however, for the find spot has yet to be further explored, and although most of the surviving panels were installed in the Getty Villa in the early 1970s, they have neither been on view nor readily accessible since the mid-1980s; nor has the mosaic itself been closely examined, thoroughly researched, or adequately published. The museum, therefore, has initiated a full documentation, conservation, and exhibition program with the aim of understanding better the mosaic's ancient contexts and modern history. The Getty panels are scheduled to return to public view in Spring 2016.

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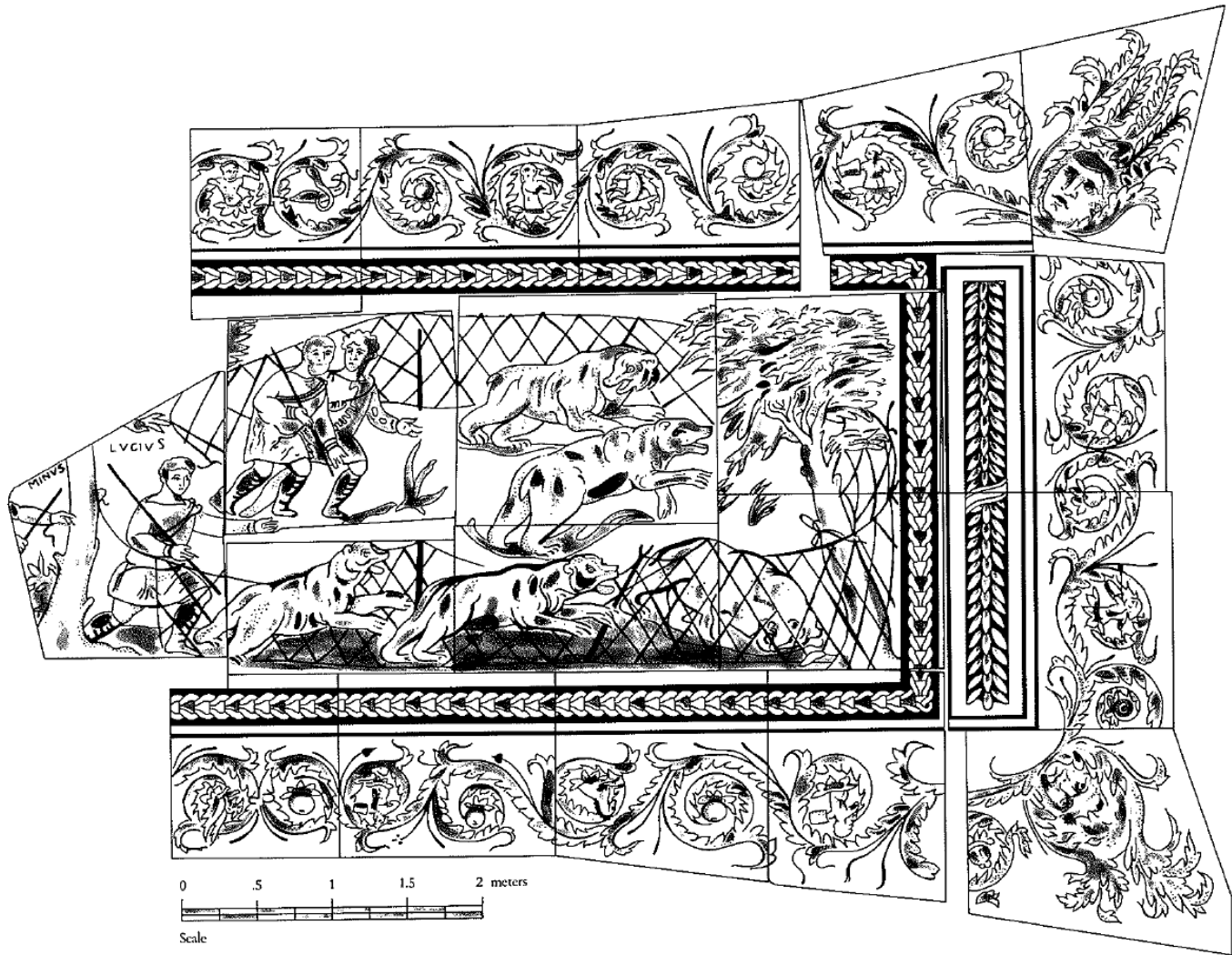
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Getty Bear Hunt Mosaic after Ball 1984



Getty Bear Hunt Mosaic Detail