

Considerations, Compromise and Conservation of a Fragmentary Mosaic Panel of Achilles and Briseis

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The Getty Museum's Roman floor mosaic with Achilles and Briseis dates to the 2nd century A.D (68.AH.12). Of possible eastern Mediterranean provenance, it is composed of stone and glass tesserae and depicts a scene from the *Iliad* in which Achilles is separated from Briseis. A youthful male, probably Patroklos stands to the viewer's left while Achilles reclines next to him. Phoenix, Achilles' tutor, stands to the right of Achilles while the heralds Talthibios and Eurybates pull Briseis away (only a section of Briseis' head is extant).

The mosaic had been restored in the 1960's by backing fragments directly with fiberglass and joining them to a lathe structure to produce three vertical panels. The large areas of loss were filled with a jute and kaolin-based material. In the 40 years since the restoration, the fill material had changed color, and shrinkage resulted cracks and gaps. New treatment of the mosaic included removal of the old fill, surface cleaning, repositioning of some fragments, remounting on a lightweight panel, and filling with a light weight material.

The structural reversal process began with the cutting of the fiberglass backing around the perimeter of each mosaic fragment. The old fill material was identified as a jute-kaolin mix popular in the 1950s and 1960s for ceramic restoration. More problematic was the use of that same material as a grout where it had discolored to a dark brown, in effect outlining each tessera. Removal of this grout required softening with solvents in combination with steaming and mechanical action. A coating applied to the mosaic had produced unnaturally intense colors and excessive surface gloss. The coating was removed with ethanol combined with steam cleaning. Cleaning highlighted the many stone colors and renewed the indoor-outdoor quality of the image with the foreground tent scene combined with angular structures in the right background.

Once the correct dimensions of the mosaic were determined, two honeycomb Hexcel panels were spliced together to make a single backing panel. The positions of the individual mosaic fragments were guided by a scaled, gridded drawing, and fasteners were attached to the reverse of the mosaic and threaded through the Hexcel panel. Once the fragments were mounted, different aesthetic options for completing the composition were discussed. Thin, lightweight fill panels were made by filling the open aluminum Hexcel grid with grout and bolting the panels to the heavier aluminum support.

The treatment of the mosaic pointed to both strengths and limitations of different materials and approaches. Although strong and readily available, cements are heavy and extremely difficult to reverse. The addition of too much aggregate

material such as lightweight filler can also weaken the mix cohesion. Also, in considering treatment options in different regions of the world, aluminum Hexcel may not be commonly available. An option may be to use an unfilled cement but also to take advantage of geometric forms, such as found in Hexcel panels, to create panels. This so-called “shell approach” may prove a viable approach in reducing the use of aggregate and the amount of cement, while providing a rigid geometric backing structure.

References

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Images

Fig. 1 Mosaic overall, before treatment. Note 3 separate panels.

Fig. 2 Detail of Achilles face, after cleaning.

Fig. 3 Detail of colored harp tesserae.

Fig. 4 Graphic with each color representing a restoration panel.

Fig. 5 Unfinished open grid restoration panel (left) bolted to backing panel.

Fig. 6 Sample of restoration panel with lightweight grout base (grey) and top coat (brown).

Fig. 7 Mosaic overall, after treatment



Fig.1

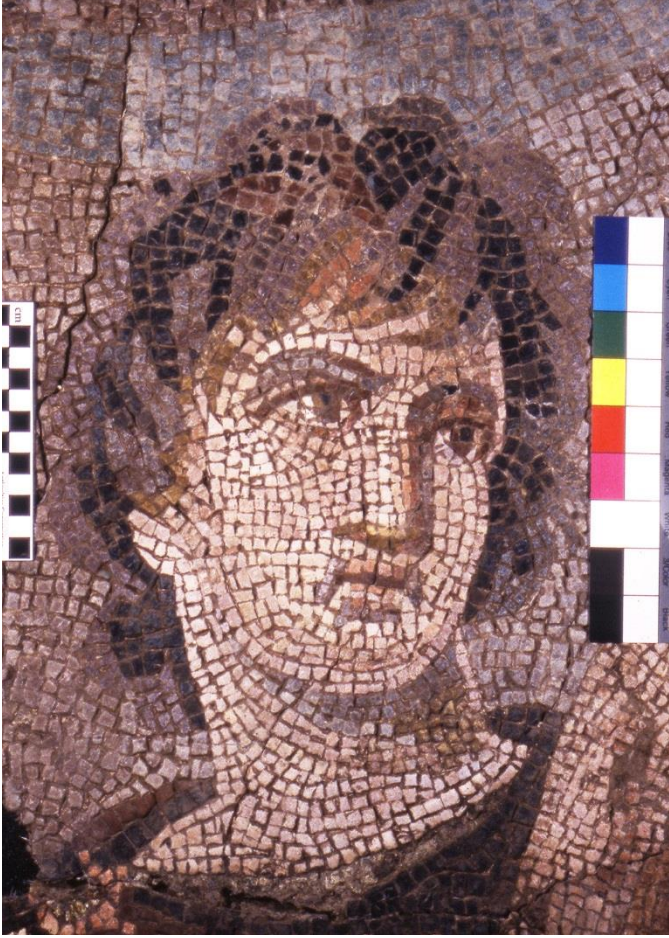


Fig.2



Fig. 3

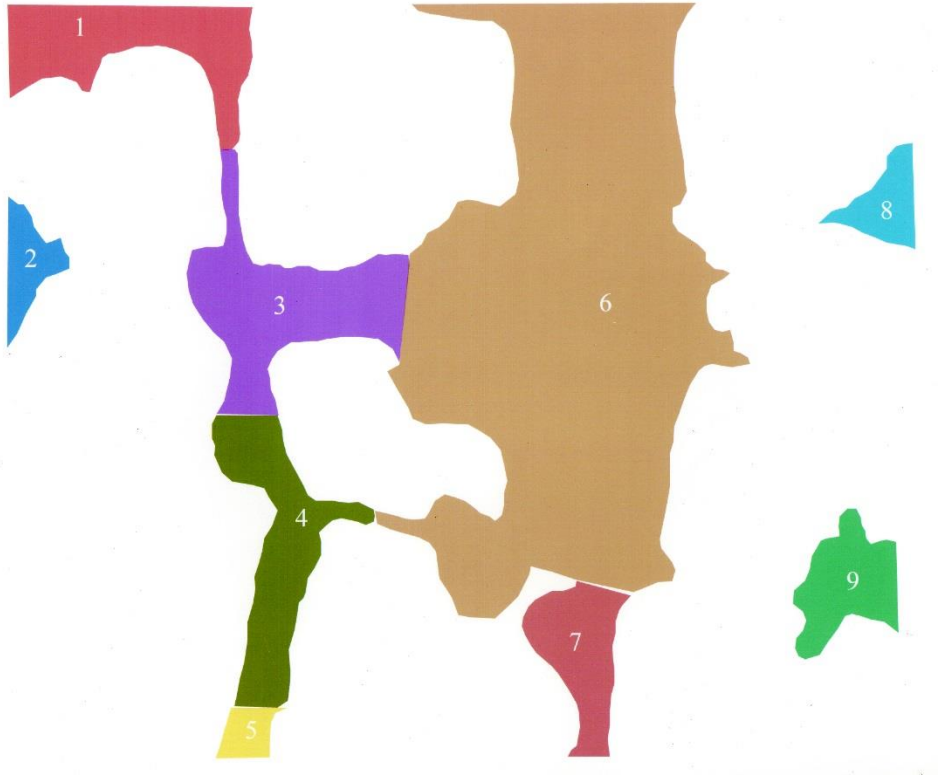


Fig. 4

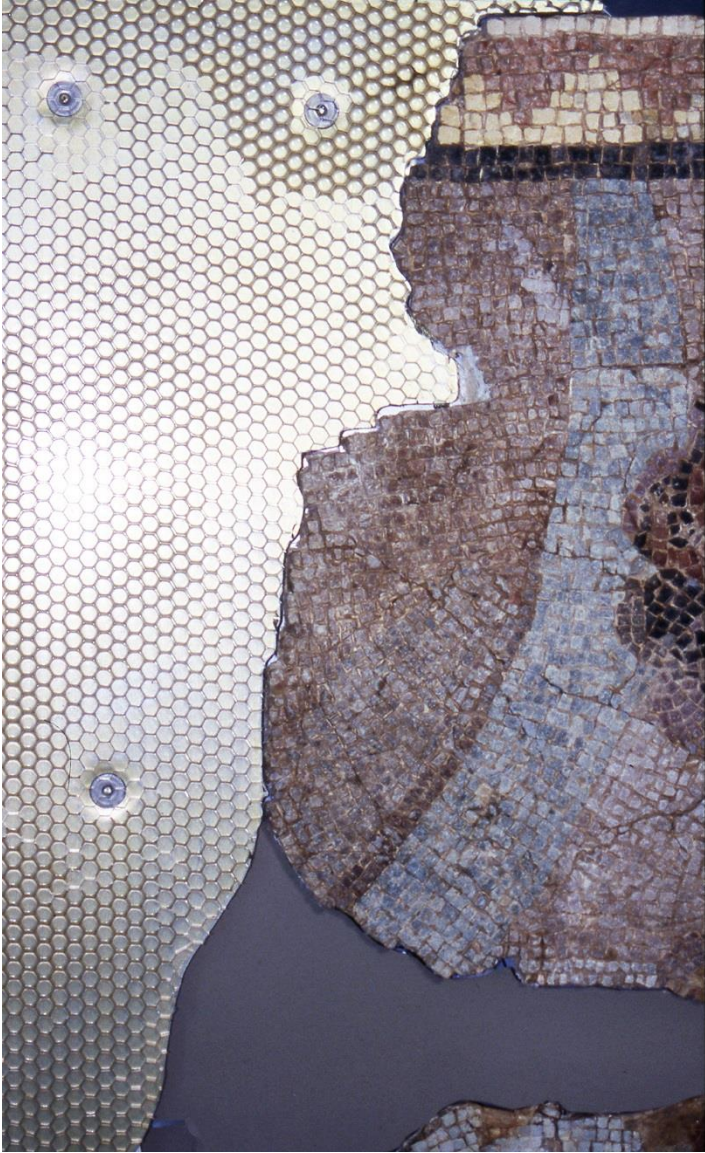


Fig. 5

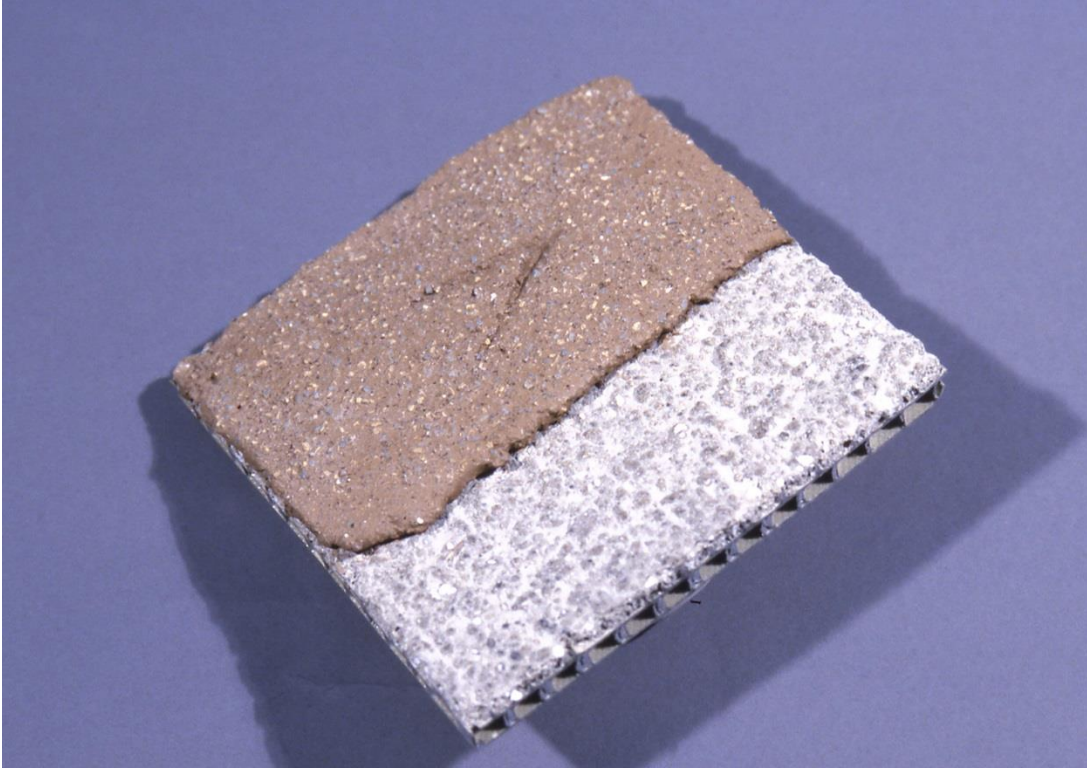


Fig. 6



Fig. 7