

# A GLASS OPUS SECTILE PANEL FROM CORINTH

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a glass opus sectile panel excavated at Corinth in 1981. The building in which it was found is situated east of the theater and is one of a suite of structures thought to have been destroyed shortly before A.D. 300. The author explores the subject matter of the panel (four fish swimming within a border of interlaced, crossed squares) with respect to a broad range of Roman decorative arts, and suggests that the panel may originally have been intended as wall decoration.

A little over a century after the destruction of Corinth through Roman action in 146 B.C., the city was refounded as a Roman colony on the initiative of Julius Caesar and was settled with Roman veterans.<sup>1</sup> By Strabo's time in the late 1st century B.C. the city had already revived: "Corinth is called wealthy because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which one leads straight to Asia and the other to Italy" (Strab. 8.6.20). Pausanias, who visited Corinth in the 170s, reported that the greater number of things worthy of mention belonged to the new city.<sup>2</sup> Among the monuments he cites are the baths of Hadrian and of the Spartan Eurykles, the water supply that Hadrian brought from Lake Stymphalus,<sup>3</sup> the arch over the Lechaion road,<sup>4</sup> and the odeion, which the writer Philostratus says was built by Herodes Atticus, the wealthy Athenian patron who put his name on architectural renovation all over Greece.<sup>5</sup> Excavations by the American School of Classical Studies have revealed a Roman forum, temples, fountain houses, and much else indicating that in the Imperial period the city flourished as a Graeco-Roman metropolis.<sup>6</sup>

1. Strab. 8.6.23; Paus. 2.1.2; Plut. *Vit. Caes.* 57; Dio Cass. 43.50. I wish to thank Charles K. Williams II for inviting me to publish the wood and glass panel and for providing me the opportunity to examine it at Corinth in 1982. Only now is the article appearing, a delay attributable solely to me, yet this intervening time has allowed me to take into account a new understanding of the chronology of

the context provided by more recent excavations as well as providing the opportunity to cite apt comparisons. I also wish to acknowledge the valuable comments made by anonymous readers that have improved the logic and clarity of the paper. Nancy Bookidis kindly arranged to provide the photographs reproduced here. Karen Hutchinson Sotiriou is responsible for the excellent drawing of the panel.

2. Paus. 2.2.6; see also *Corinth* XVII, p. 1; *Corinth* X, pp. 1-11.

3. Lolos 1997.

4. Edwards 1994.

5. *Corinth* X, pp. 1-2; Philostr. *VS* 2.551.

6. Williams 1989; Williams 1993. Note also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 37 (the Corinthian Oration), thought to be by Favorinus, a hellenized Roman from Arles.



**Figure 1. Opus sectile panel from Corinth. Corinth Museum. Scale 1:4**

Corinth was in fact the administrative center and seat of the governor of the senatorial province of Achaëa.<sup>7</sup>

In 1981, excavators recovered an unusual example of the rich material culture for which Corinth was famous, an opus sectile glass picture set in a wood frame (Figs. 1–2).<sup>8</sup> The panel was found in the ruins of a room in an area of shops near the theater (adjacent to the odeion mentioned by Pausanias). The room was one of six in a Roman building situated south of the east–west colonnaded street and just east of the court in front of the theater. Six western rooms were excavated in 1981, two of which had already been cleared in the excavations of 1928–1929. The eastern part of the building lies partially buried under the dump from the earlier excavations on top of which is the Xenia Hotel. The glass panel is just over half a meter across (0.57 m) and was found face up on the floor of the room, its

7. Groag 1939.

8. Williams and Zervos 1982, pp. 133–134, pl. 42:a; *AR* 1981–1982, pp. 19–20, fig. 38; Touchais 1982, pp. 542–543, fig. 21; Winter 1982, p. 545, pl. 68, fig. 4. A report in Williams and Zervos 1983, p. 14, provides more information on the excavation in question.

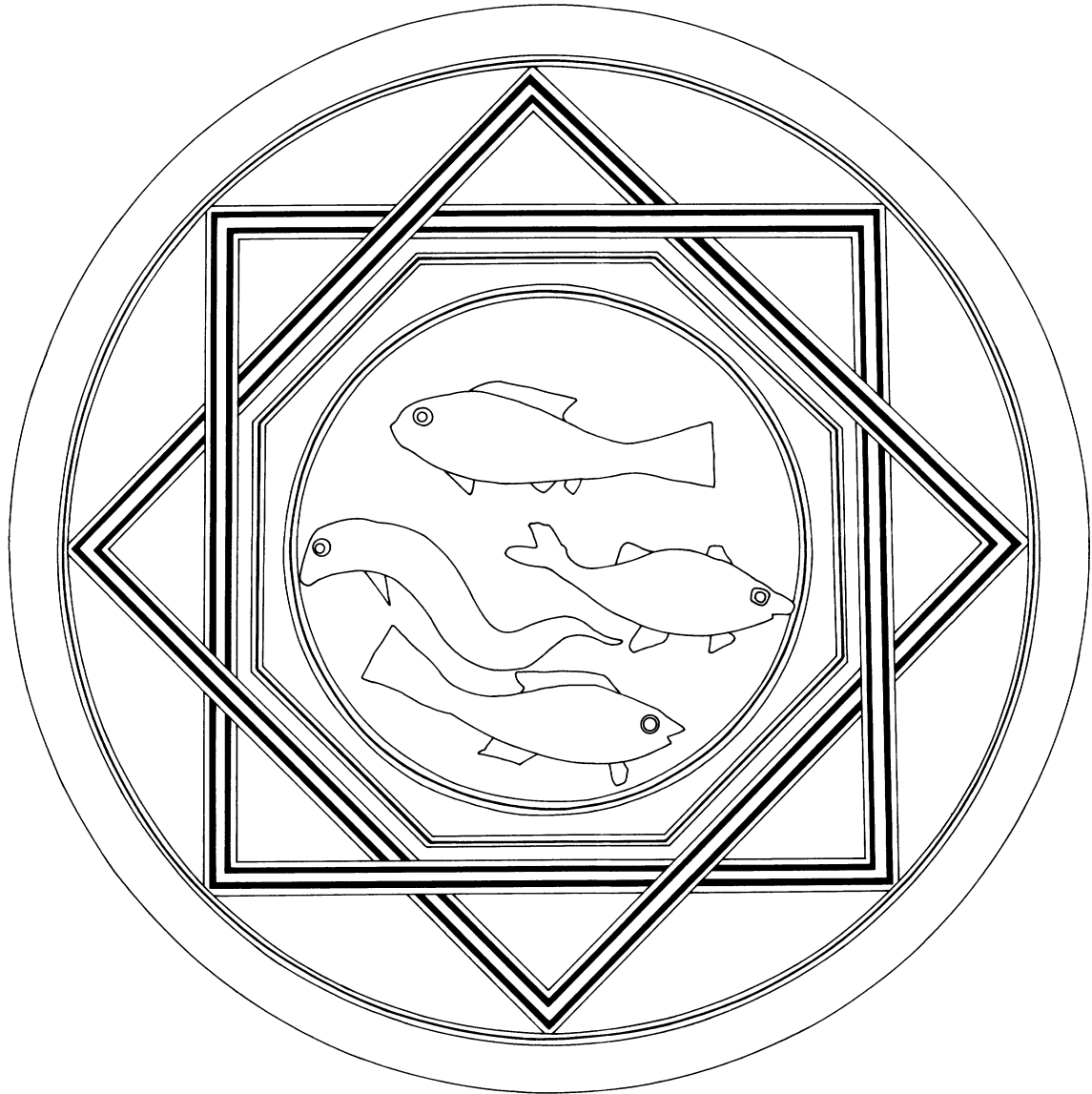


Figure 2. Opus sectile panel from Corinth. Corinth Museum. Scale 1:4, drawing by Karen Hutchinson Sotiriou

wooden frame completely charred from a fire that had destroyed the building along with most of its contents. In an adjacent room in the same destruction level were twelve lamps, some of them assuredly of the earlier 3rd century, a sestertius of the emperor Gordian III from the year 240,<sup>9</sup> an African Red Ware plate, and a collection of coarse pottery: three large transport or storage amphoras, a funnel thought to have been used with the amphoras, a table amphora with a lid, a pitcher, and three cooking pots, one of them with a lid.<sup>10</sup>

9. *RIC* IV.3, no. 291; Williams and Zervos 1982, p. 152, no. 44.

10. Williams and Zervos 1982, p. 135, no. 57 (one-handed cooking pot); 1983, pp. 15–18, nos. 25–46 (the lamps and the rest of the pottery).

In their first report the excavators compared the African Red Ware plate with a 4th-century example of Form 50 of John Hayes's typology, but they nevertheless considered the plate to be part of the mid-3rd-century destruction because, as Hayes himself had observed, plates of this type were made over a wide span of time. Some were found at Dura Europos

(known to have been sacked in A.D. 256) and others are associated with the Herulian destruction at Athens and Olympia.<sup>11</sup>

The building in which the mosaic glass panel was found is thought to have been built after the earthquake of A.D. 77, and at the time it was excavated it was believed to have burned and been destroyed shortly after the mid-3rd century. It could not be determined whether this destruction occurred before the Herulian attack on the city in A.D. 267 or was to be associated with that attack. According to this initial reconstruction of events, the framed glass panel was made or was awaiting use around the middle of the 3rd century. Since that first report, however, the excavators have revealed an additional sequence of buildings (lying south of the building where the glass panel was found) on the east side of the north-south street running east of the theater. Objects found in the debris of these more recently excavated buildings, pottery and coins, have challenged the earlier assumption that the building where the opus sectile panel was found was destroyed shortly after the middle of the 3rd century. Now it is argued that the whole suite of structures situated east of the theater came to ruin through some natural disaster, apparently an earthquake, late in the 3rd century, shortly before A.D. 300.<sup>12</sup> If this hypothesis can be maintained, and it appears likely, then the context of the glass panel would oblige one to say that it was probably made and used (or was awaiting use) toward the end of the century.

The panel was lifted as a unit though the many sections were partially disorganized and disconnected (rather like a jigsaw puzzle of non-interlocking pieces that has been shaken); it is now in the storerooms of the Corinth Museum where the pieces have been skillfully recomposed (Fig. 1). The composition is circular. An eight-pointed star formed by two interlaced, crossed squares is set within a framing circle of glass. Within the crossed squares is a circular picture featuring four fish. The complete glass assemblage was mounted on wood that had become carbonized in the fire and has now largely disintegrated. The technique is the glass version of opus sectile so commonly found in marble floors. The lines of the squares and the two concentric circles are made with multiple strips of glass; the triangular spaces formed by the interlaced lines of the squares are filled with solid pieces of glass. Among the colors of the glass are blue, red, and mustard yellow. Other sections have corroded to an opaque white, or black.

The outer circular frame is made of composite strips of blue and yellow(?) glass with a green appearance where it has been cleaned. The eight fan-shaped sections within the outer ring and outside the eight-pointed star (formed by the crossed squares) are made of fused, preformed tesserae (many of them now deformed), about thirty-five tesserae for each of the eight sections. The central unit of each one has a light-colored (perhaps white) matrix with a dark central spot surrounded by seven lighter spots, in all likelihood a red opaque central spot surrounded by seven yellow spots. This composite group is in turn surrounded by ten satellite spots of white glass.

11. Hayes 1972, pp. 69–73, Form 50, Type A, nos. 1–6 (fragments from Dura Europos in the Yale University Art Gallery); nos. 9–13 (fragments from the Athenian Agora associated with the Herulian sack of A.D. 267); nos. 14–16 (fragments from the Herulian destruction deposits at Olympia).

12. Williams and Zervos 1985, p. 68; 1987, p. 28, n. 38; Marty 1993, p. 125, ns. 43, 45.

The eight triangular spaces formed by the crossed squares are filled with eight uniform pieces of glass: six of blue glass, which are corroded white, and two (the top and bottom ones) now appearing a dirty mustard yellow. The eight spandrel-shaped areas within the crossed squares and outside the central circular medallion consist of fused preformed tesserae of the same description as those outside the two squares. The lines of the two squares are formed by composite strips of glass (five in all) of two contrasting colors, now appearing black and white, two black stripes alternating with three white ones. The white glass has a whitish-tan corroded surface different in appearance from the white corrosion of the blue glass. The octagon formed by the crossed squares is itself framed by a continuous non-interlacing border formed by four parallel strips of glass in the following sequence: dark color (originally mustard yellow?), white, black, white. Finally, a border of three concentric strips of glass—white, black, white—frames the circular medallion itself.

The circular field of the central medallion is of blue glass, the surface of which is corroded to a white color. There are four fish, all rendered in prefabricated millefiore and banded glass units, standard glassmaking techniques. The fish are represented alive and not hanging up as if after a catch, and they swim alternately left and right, thereby giving the tableau a distinct orientation, with a top and bottom, and left and right. The fish are shown at eye level and are depicted with a degree of realism that, even if not completely accurate, invites identification. Four varieties are represented, one of them an eel.

The topmost fish, swimming left, is probably a gilt-head bream (*Sparus aurata*), a variety that Columella (*Rust.* 8.16) says was raised in Roman freshwater lakes and fishponds (Fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> I would not, however, rule out a red bream (*Pagellus erythrinus*). The prominent scales are mustard yellow, gray, and white. The tail, upper fin, and lower back fin are of two colors that now appear black and white. The body is outlined with a stripe that excludes the fins and tail, and is interrupted by the open mouth of the fish. The outlining stripe is white on the underside of the fish, dark above. The eye is formed by a central dot within three concentric rings.

The second fish, swimming right, is distinguished by its relatively long and narrow mouth (Fig. 4). This is probably a fish of the *Labridae* family, the wrasse, or sea bass.<sup>14</sup> The body appears white, or at least is the same corroded white color as the square border strips. The mouth is open, lips black; the gills are composed of four bands. The interior fin behind the gills must have been of a different color. The upper part of the fish appears to be of streaked, colorless glass; the lower part is possibly of white opaque glass. The eye is formed by a central dot within two concentric rings.

The third fish, swimming left, is a moray eel (*Murana helena*),<sup>15</sup> but is shown improperly with a fin behind the gills as on the common eel (*Anguilla vulgaris*) (Fig. 5). The moray eel lacks pectoral fins, as Pliny the Elder knew (*HN* 9.73), so this is an artist's error; the identification as a moray eel is confirmed by the striped edges along its top and bottom and the spots done in the millefiore glass technique; the body is formed by four rows of

13. Palombi and Santarelli 1986, pp. 99–100; Thompson 1947, pp. 292–294.

14. Palombi and Santarelli 1986, pp. 68–75; Thompson 1947, pp. 140–142.

15. Palombi and Santarelli 1986, pp. 212–213; Thompson 1947, pp. 162–165. Also in the Kenchreai panels, nos. 16–17: *Kenchreai* II, pp. 72, 86, figs. 31, 87–88, 91–92.



Figure 3. Opus sectile panel, detail. Fish, probably a gilt-head bream (*Sparus aurata*).



Figure 4. Opus sectile panel, detail. Wrasse, or sea bass, of the *Labridae* family.

fused, preformed tesserae, pulled out and deformed at the tail. The body is outlined first with a light strip below and a dark strip above and is secondarily outlined with a twisted strip (similar in effect to a barber-pole) along half the length of the body below, two-thirds of the length above. The tesserae have light spots against a dark background. The fin is gray, the gills mustard yellow. The eye has a central spot surrounded by two concentric rings.

The bottommost fish, swimming right, is distinguished by its vertically banded coloration and the straight-edged tail (Fig. 6). It could be the *Serranellus cabilla*, a perch.<sup>16</sup> The body is formed by prefabricated units of glass, bent double and arranged vertically. Two types are used: one has alternating black and gray stripes with white; the other has alternating gray and mustard yellow stripes. The tail is executed in horizontal bands of black and white glass. The upper and lower back fins have large and angular white units set in a dark background. The curved gill has a thin dark stripe within a mustard yellow field. The eye is formed by a central dot (white?) within three concentric rings, gray, yellow, and dark. The body is outlined with a light strip below, and a dark strip above.

16. Palombi and Santarelli 1986, p. 44; Thompson 1947, p. 196.



Figure 5. Opus sectile panel, detail.  
Moray eel (*Murana helena*).



Figure 6. Opus sectile panel, detail.  
Fish, perhaps a perch (*Serranellus cabilla*).

The significance of the species that seem to be represented is best understood if we consider them together with a closely related set of fish represented in the glass opus sectile panels found at Kenchreai, the eastern port of Corinth, in 1964 and 1965.<sup>17</sup> In the Kenchreai panels the artisans inserted prefabricated mosaic glass fish of similar typology and design into harborside scenes. It is worth noting that despite some ambiguities, the craftsmen have attempted to render specific species or at least families of fish in both the Corinth and Kenchreai panels. In the latter, the wrasse is the most common, but the gilt-head bream and moray eel, present in the Corinth panel, are also shown. In his study of artificial fishponds in Roman Italy, James Higginbotham has surveyed the most common varieties of fish cultivated by the Romans, among which are eels, the *Sparus aurata*, and fish from the family *Labridae*.<sup>18</sup> These are among the fish identified in both the Corinth and Kenchreai panels. Several other varieties were also common, such as the red mullet (*Mullus barbatus*) and the gray mullet, which are apparently present in the Kenchreai panels, though missing from the Corinth panel. These were not exotic fish, but common varieties recognizable to anyone familiar with the fishmarket or the kitchen.

17. *Kenchreai* II, pp. 67–120, nos. 16–26, drawings xvi–xxii.

18. Higginbotham 1997, pp. 41–53.

Aspects of technique, design, and date also link the panel from Corinth with those from Kenchreai. All of the panels were made in glass opus sectile embodying carefully shaped pieces of glass, and mounted on wood. The colors used in both are comparable, and the manufacturing technique of the fish, as we have seen, is identical. The panels from Kenchreai exhibit a wider range of design and subject matter than the Corinth example: noteworthy are the panels with human figures and those with harborside panoramas of architecture and scenes of fishing. More closely related to the Corinth panel is the set of formal square panels with geometric motifs.<sup>19</sup> All of these feature a circle within a square with a variety of subsidiary floral and geometric motifs. The squares are approximately 1.20 m on a side in comparison to a diameter of 0.57 m for the Corinth circle. The Kenchreai panels have been dated to the third quarter of the 4th century by a convergence of criteria: a coin found in a crucial location and carbon-14 analysis of the wood, both of which yielded dates corresponding to known seismic disturbances (A.D. 365 and 375). An earthquake would account for the destruction of the complex where the glass panels were stored and the subsequent abandonment of the panels themselves. Some fifty to seventy-five years later than the Corinth panel, the Kenchreai panels nevertheless provide a broad chronological match for it.<sup>20</sup>

Until recently, the set of Kenchreai panels would have been the standard comparison, but within the last ten years, a remarkably similar opus sectile panel of glass has emerged from the ruins of a Roman house excavated in Rimini, Italy (Fig. 7).<sup>21</sup> The new panel is smaller, only 0.32 m on a side, but the artistic design and putative function warrant notice. Three fish, actually two fish and a dolphin (the dolphin on the bottom), are shown swimming above one another in alternating directions within a circle of blue glass, 0.27 m in diameter. The fish range in length from 0.16 m to 0.20 m. The blue field is framed by rings of green and violet glass, the outer one octagonally shaped. The original format of the panel was square with the four corners once filled with yellow and white glass (now missing from all but one corner). The panel was found shattered on the floor of a private house, in a room considered to be the triclinium owing to the off-center placement of a tessellated floor mosaic, and was thought to have been mounted on the wall near the entrance to the room. According to the excavator, the latest coins in the house, which was destroyed by fire, can be assigned to A.D. 257–258, corresponding to a period of barbarian raids in the Po valley.

From the point of view of technique we should also draw attention to other mosaic glass fish (in addition to those on the Kenchreai panels), isolated ones not part of larger pictures, cited in the original excavation report of the Corinth panel.<sup>22</sup> The Corning Museum of Glass possesses a mosaic fish made in the same technique, which, owing to its size (length 0.17 m), plaster backing, and flat surface, may once have been set with opus sectile sections as part of a revetment.<sup>23</sup> Also related are two groups of fragmentary mosaic glass fish, one formerly in the Kofler-Truniger Collection and later sold at Christie's in London in 1985, the other sold at Christie's in New York in 2000.<sup>24</sup>

19. *Kenchreai* II, pp. 186–199, figs. 171–210.

20. *Kenchreai* II, pp. 249–250, 268–269.

21. Bologna, Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna, inv. 184584. Ortalli 2000, pp. 516, 519–520, no. 183. I am grateful to Mirella Marini Calvani and Jacopo Ortalli for their permission to reproduce the illustration of the mosaic from Rimini.

22. Williams and Zervos 1982, p. 124, n. 27.

23. Goldstein 1979, p. 264, no. 792, pl. 36; *Glass of the Caesars*, p. 31, no. 9.

24. *Ancient Glass*, pp. 118–119, lot 226; *Antiquities*, pp. 88–89, lot 356.





Figure 7. Wall mosaic from Rimini. Bologna, Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna, inv. 184584. After Ortalli 2000, p. 519, no. 183

Mosaic glass fish depicted in media other than opus sectile exist in earlier Roman decorative arts. Fragments of a glass plate excavated in the Athenian Agora reveal what appears to be the head of a man wearing a hat, perhaps a fisherman (and perhaps even Eros as a fisherman), together with the edge of what may be his craft on the water and the head and tail of one or more fish.<sup>25</sup> While the elements of fish are made in the same fashion as the fish in the Corinth and Kenchreai panels, the overall technique of the plate is not opus sectile. Instead fish and fisherman were fused into the body of the plate, a matrix of opaque blue glass formed by fused polygonal sections of glass. Gladys Weinberg, who published the fragments, drew attention to other fragmentary mosaic glass fish that seem to have come from similar plates, among them fragments in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and the Toledo Museum of Art. She argued that the whole group was at least a century and a half earlier than the destruction debris (dating to A.D. 267) in which the Athenian fragments were found, and perhaps earlier.<sup>26</sup>

Now, we should turn to another aspect of the Corinth panel, specifically the decorative elements, and broaden the discussion to investigate the use of the fish motif and the principal geometric motif, the interlaced square, in a range of Roman decorative arts. Given the extent of fishing and the popularity of fish as food in antiquity, the subject is very common in Roman art, as Demetrios Michaelides has noted in a recent publication of mosaic and marble floors from Sidi Khrebish, Libya.<sup>27</sup> We can therefore highlight only select images that exemplify different approaches to the

25. Weinberg 1962.

26. Weinberg 1962, pp. 32–34, figs. 4, 6, 9.

27. Michaelides 1998, pp. 75–80, citing earlier bibliography.

subject: fish as components in larger pictorial scenes, fish depicted in a taxonomic sense, and fish as independent decorative elements in interior decoration and the decorative arts.

With regard to pictorial scenes, I have already noted the fish in the harborside seascapes represented in the opus sectile glass panels from Kenchreai and those in the fragmentary glass dish from the Athenian Agora.<sup>28</sup> In mosaics, scenes of fishing are legion: witness, for example, one from the so-called Maison d'Arsenal in Sousse, Tunisia,<sup>29</sup> and another from what appears to have been a cult building, a Bakcheion, at Tramithia on Melos, perhaps of the 3rd century, in which in a circular field a fisherman in a small boat is surrounded by more than fifteen fish swimming in every direction.<sup>30</sup> In these as in many other mosaics, a great variety of fish are represented with the emphasis on the bounty of the sea and the success (real or mystical) of the fishermen.

A more scientific, ichthyological approach is suggested by two rectangular mosaic floors from Pompeii, now in the Naples Archaeological Museum, and a less well known and later floor from the Roman villa of La Pineda in Vila-Seca, Spain, now in the Museo Arqueológico, Tarragona; in both the fish are sufficiently individualized as to be susceptible to species identification.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the mosaics from Pompeii and the villa of La Pineda, where the fish are gathered together as if in an aquarium, a mosaic from a 3rd-century(?) villa in Patras features four rows of different kinds of fish displayed as if enlarged from a textbook illustration or as if laid out after the catch awaiting identification.<sup>32</sup> They all face one direction, heads to the right.

Much closer to the Corinth and Rimini panels in formal arrangement and appearance are the fish shown in a set of panels in a floor at Zliten in Libya (Fig. 8).<sup>33</sup> A grid in the central field combines eight squares of mosaic alternating in checkerboard fashion with eight squares of opus sectile, the whole sixteen-unit grid framed by panels of opus sectile and mosaic, the latter with narrative scenes from the amphitheater. The opus sectile squares have geometric designs conceptually related to the crossed squares in the Corinth panel. Each square mosaic unit contains a circular, porthole vision of fish, three or four fish to each circle, facing left and right, as in the Corinth and Rimini panels. This alternating disposition of fish, used to enhance the formal arrangement, is seen also in a wool and linen curtain (length 1.4 m) from Antinoë, Egypt, now in the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyon, where the fish even cast shadows.<sup>34</sup> David Parrish has argued that the Zliten floor should be dated to the first half of the 3rd century, about fifty years earlier than the glass panel from Corinth, but roughly contemporary with the panel found at Rimini.<sup>35</sup> The notion of displaying fish in a circular field is not original with 3rd-century artists but goes back at least as early as the 1st century to judge from a mosaic roundel from Pompeii (diameter 0.58 m).<sup>36</sup> In the Pompeian mosaic, however, the fish are shown swimming randomly and from several vantage points, as if the mosaic craftsman had sought to give the impression of looking down into a fishpond. Despite their slightly different artistic

28. See above, ns. 17 and 25.

29. Dunbabin 1978, pp. 81–82, pl. xlvii, figs. 119–120; Martin and Fradier 1989, pp. 130–131.

30. Bosanquet 1898, pl. 1, reproduced in Levi 1942, p. 52, pl. vii:2 and Kondoleon 1994, p. 246, fig. 156.

31. Capaldo and Moncharmont 1989 (Pompeii); Bobadilla 1969 (La Pineda).

32. Touchais 1980, pp. 616–617, fig. 74.

33. Aurigemma 1926, figs. 77–85, pl. D. The resemblance of the Kenchreai fish to those on the Zliten panels was observed in *Kenchreai II*, p. 135.

34. Weitzmann 1979, pp. 208–209, nos. 182–183 (a fragment in the Louvre belongs to the Lyon hanging); Bourgon-Amir 1993, I, pp. 204–205, pls. 209–210.

35. Parrish 1985.

36. Spano 1910, pp. 555–557, fig. 1.



Figure 8. Detail of floor mosaic from Zliten, Libya. Archaeological Museum, Tripoli. After Aurigemma 1926, p. 137, pl. D

conception, these pictures in mosaic and opus sectile demonstrate the longevity in Roman interior decoration of the subject of fish in a circular field.

I have largely omitted discussion of fish motifs in the portable decorative arts, in part because the subject is so extensive that even a cursory survey would tend to blur our focus on the Corinth panel. Worthy of mention, nevertheless, is one object, a shallow dish of green serpentine inlaid with fish in gold leaf, once in the French royal treasury at Saint-Denis and now in the Louvre.<sup>37</sup> In his far-ranging discussion of this piece, which he would date to the 4th century, Erwin Bielefeld drew attention to many other examples of ancient decorative arts featuring fish, including the fragmentary glass dish from the Athenian Agora mentioned above. The serpentine dish and the fragmentary glass one from the Agora help demonstrate the persistence of the theme in the Roman decorative arts.

The second decorative feature of the Corinth panel is the geometric design framing the circular field of fish—the interlaced, crossed squares forming an eight-pointed star. This motif is not represented in 1st- and 2nd-century mosaics and opus sectile but, despite its absence in the glass panels from Kenchreai, it became a standard element in the 3rd and 4th centuries in the decorative arts and in interior decoration including mosaics, opus sectile, and wall painting.

The motif occurs in mosaic floors throughout the empire.<sup>38</sup> One of the best-dated 3rd-century mosaic floors incorporating this design is situated in the north wing of the Large Baths at Anemurium in Turkey.<sup>39</sup> Associated pottery and coins as late as ca. A.D. 225 provide evidence for the date of original construction. Work on the building seems to have ceased after the Persian invasion of Asia Minor under Shapur I in

37. Inv. MR IV, 415 (D 927). Bielefeld 1972, pls. xv–xvii.

38. Blázquez et al. 1989, pp. 55–56, with references to Tunisia, Spain, Britain, and Germany; Neal 1981, pp. 52, 69, 86, figs. 25:a, 25:c, 36, 52, 63 (Britain); Levi 1947, pp. 304–306, pl. 68 (Antioch); Wilson 1983, pp. 22, 41, figs. 10, 21 (Piazza Armerina).

39. Campbell 1998, pp. 28, 32, pl. 29.

A.D. 260. Floors of opus sectile are much rarer than those of mosaic and thus instances of this geometric design are much less frequent. Examples include one in the floor of a villa in Utica, Tunisia,<sup>40</sup> and another in the floor of the so-called House of the Nymphaeum in Ostia.<sup>41</sup> In wall painting crossed squares are prominent in the decoration of the imperial cult temple in Luxor, Egypt (datable to the late 3rd century); largely destroyed today, the designs are best known from watercolor views of the work made by the English Egyptologist John Gardner Wilkinson in 1859.<sup>42</sup>

The pattern also appears in the useful and luxury arts in the 3rd and 4th centuries. In textiles the design is used in the shoulder medallions (*orbiculi*) on linen tunics as early as the 3rd century, as for example on a tunic now in Damascus from a tomb in Palmyra, Syria (before A.D. 273);<sup>43</sup> in silver, as an engraved emblem on one of the plates from the Kaiseraugst treasure datable to shortly before A.D. 350;<sup>44</sup> in gold jewelry, as part of the *opus interrasile* frame of a fibula in a private collection in Germany datable by comparison to other jewelry incorporating coins of Constantine to the period around A.D. 325;<sup>45</sup> and in glass, as the scratched decoration on a dish from a 4th-century burial in Cologne.<sup>46</sup>

Of all the examples cited, the motif as shown in the floor of opus sectile in Ostia and in the wall paintings in Luxor offer the two best matches for the Corinth panel. The design of the set of crossed squares in the Ostia floor is related in many aspects to that of the Corinth panel.<sup>47</sup> The composition of this large floor, ca. 7.0 by 6.7 m, features a central square unit surrounded by eight units of similar size all separated from one another by rectangular units. The four corner units (about 1.40 m on a side) are the ones with interlaced squares. The lines of the interlaced squares are formed by tripartite, parallel stripes of stone of contrasting hues: a center stripe of giallo flanked by rosso and africano. The effect is similar to that created by the multicolored stripes forming the squares of the Corinth panel and wholly different from the interlaced squares found in mosaics where the sides of the squares invariably are formed by bands of *guilloche* (or cable pattern). A central disk of africano, ringed by stones of other colors, is placed where the circle of fish is situated in the Corinth panel. Background triangles and other interstices are of lighter stone.

The wall paintings in the imperial cult temple at Luxor (formerly much better preserved) take us a step closer to the function of the Corinth panel.<sup>48</sup> On the wall, below a painted frieze of figures and horses, was a tall painted dado, the lower part of which embodied square units (0.86 m on a side) alternating with upright rectangular ones. At least two of the square units featured interlaced squares and the whole arrangement, though linear, recalls the alternating square and rectangular units of the Ostia floor. In Luxor the design of an opus sectile floor is rendered in painting on a wall—*faux-marble*, as it were. It forms a good analogy to the Corinth panel, which could be seen as a rendering in glass (mounted on wood) of an opus sectile floor.

The appearance of a motif such as interlaced squares in roughly contemporaneous works of art in various media indicates how inter-related these arts were. Thus far I have only taken into account relatively

40. Alexander et al. 1973, pp. 51–53, no. 59, pl. 24 (dated there to the second half of the 2nd or early 3rd century, though other scholars have proposed different dates).

41. Becatti 1961, pp. 103–104, no. 189, pl. ccvii.

42. Monneret de Villard 1953, esp. p. 91, pls. 30:a, 31:b, left; Bianchi Bandinelli 1971, p. 291, fig. 266; Deckers 1979, col. fig. 14, facing p. 624.

43. Pfister 1934, pl. 6, reproduced in Trilling 1982, p. 105, fig. 1; Schmidt-Colinet 1991, pp. 22–23, fig. 5; Schmidt-Colinet and Stauffer 2000, pp. 162–163, no. 355, pls. 3, 54, 55. I do not accept the 2nd-century date proposed by Schmidt-Colinet for this tunic. The tomb in which it was found, despite having been constructed in the early years of the 2nd century, surely saw use by several generations of the family.

44. Baratte 1984.

45. Deppert-Lippitz 1996, p. 39, figs. 6:a, 6:b; the same pattern appears on the frame of a pendant gold coin of the early-5th-century emperor Honorius (A.D. 395–423) in Berlin (Greifenhagen 1970, p. 65, pls. 45:1–2, 46:1).

46. Doppelfeld 1959 (excavation report); Fremersdorf 1967, p. 97, pl. 89 (illustration).

47. See n. 41, above.

48. Monneret de Villard 1953, p. 91, pls. 30:a, 31:b, left.

indestructible materials that have survived well from antiquity, such as mosaics. Missing, for instance, are pile carpets and most woodwork. While much can be made from the obvious relationship of the Corinth panel to opus sectile and wall painting imitating opus sectile, the relationship to perishable materials, such as textiles and wood furniture, is harder to gauge. I would argue, nevertheless, that patterns found in furniture, especially inlaid veneers of variously textured wood, played a central role in the development of designs. Consider, for example, two pieces of wood furniture excavated at Herculaneum: a stool with a square top and a couch, both featuring first-rate veneer.<sup>49</sup> The veneer is more accomplished than mere joinery, approaching instead the elaborate inlay technique of marquetry. The design has its counterpart in 1st-century opus sectile floors in Pompeii and Herculaneum.<sup>50</sup> It would be wrong to assert that fine woodwork was in fact the source for opus sectile in stone. Both venerable crafts must have benefited mutually from cross-fertilization as designers developed decorative schemes. The Corinth panel of wood and glass bears the same kind of relationship to opus sectile floors of the 3rd century as the veneered wood furniture from Herculaneum does to 1st-century opus sectile floors.

This brings us to the question of the function of the piece. When the panel was found, the excavators dismissed the possibility that it was a tabletop but left open the notion that it might have decorated a door or even a wall. To quote a few lines from their preliminary report: "The wood-and-glass unit definitely does not seem to have been the top of a table or part of any other such furniture, for the burnt wood on the clay floor covered much too large an area. No nails or metal cross struts, braces, feet or other hardware was found among the carbonized wood on the floor. Apparently either the wood panel (perhaps a door) burned in a freestanding position, allowing the whole unit to fall face up, or else the panel fell from a door frame or from the wall so that it landed face up."<sup>51</sup> Now, however, the persuasive evidence of the glass opus sectile panel from Rimini suggests that the Corinth panel indeed once served or was awaiting use as wall decoration. But whereas the Rimini panel came from the ruins of a private house, the Corinth panel was found in one of a series of rooms that may have been shops or storerooms. Despite its face-up position on the floor when found, a questionable position if originally mounted on a wall, I am still hesitant to guess whether the panel had been structurally installed in the room where it was found or whether it was simply being stored there, face against the wall, awaiting repairs or use elsewhere. Whatever the answer, the presence of two such similar items at Corinth and Rimini offers a partial illustration, disregarding the disparity of several centuries, of Strabo's observation cited at the outset of this article, that one of the two harbors at Corinth led to Italy.

49. Budetta 1987, pp. 198–199, fig. 90 (stool); Mols 1999, pp. 167–169, no. 13, figs. 88–93 (couch) and pp. 182–183, no. 23, fig. 125 (stool).

50. Guidobaldi, Olevano, and

Trucchi 1994a; 1994b; Guidobaldi 1985.

51. Williams and Zervos 1982, p. 133.

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