



**ASPECTS OF DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT ALGERIA THROUGH PRESERVED
MOSAIC SCENES AT THE CHERCHELL MUSEUM**

مظاهر الحياة اليومية في الجزائر القديمة من خلال المشاهد الفسيفسائية
المحفوظة بمتحف شرشال

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Abstract

Algeria stands itself for having a rich mosaic history that depicts ancient civilizations' daily live. It is a cultural asset that may be seen in the mosaic collections that have been maintained and adorned archaeological site floors. These mosaics stand out for their breathtaking beauty and special charm. They are not merely works of beauty; they also include fascinating historical and creative narratives, telling tales of farming, performing arts, and magnificent geometric patterns. In this post, we will discuss a few mosaic artworks that are housed in the Cherchell Museum to highlight their importance in revealing the prevalent way of life at the time.

Keywords. ANCIENT ALGERIA; CHERCHELL; MUSEUM; GRAPE CULTIVATION

الملخص:

تتميز الجزائر بثراثة فسيفسائية غني يعكس الحياة اليومية للحضارات القديمة. إنها كنز ثقافي يتجلى في مجموعات الفسيفساء المحفوظة في متاحفها والتي تزين أرضيات المواقع الأثرية. تتميز هذه الفسيفساء بجمالها الخلاب ورونقها الفريد. إنها ليست مجرد قطع فنية بل تحمل في طياتها قصصًا تاريخية وفنية مثيرة، تروي لنا قصة صيد الحيوانات، والزراعة، والألعاب الاستعراضية، والتصميمات الهندسية.

في هذا المقال، سنسلط الضوء على عينة من اللوحات الفسيفسائية المحفوظة في متحف شرشال، محاولين إبراز أهميتها في كشف الستار عن الحياة اليومية السائدة آنذاك.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Due to its abundance of significant historical and archaeological monuments, Algeria is known for having a rich and diverse tangible cultural legacy. Mosaics are a significant art form and one of the well-known models made by man to decorate his palaces, residences, and baths among the ancient arts that exhibit this history. Its history spans numerous eras and is displayed in several Algerian regions, including Tipaza, Tebessa, Tlemcen, Constantine, and others. These locations have intriguing artwork and motifs that depict the creative trends and handicraft methods popular during those specific historical times.

The Cherchell Museum stands out as one of Algeria's most illustrious institutions in these areas. The museum houses an important collection of mosaics and other artefacts and provides a unique chance for visitors to learn about the development of mosaics in Algeria and to explore the depths of the magnificent decorations and

artwork produced during that time. Visitors of the museum can smell the odor of antiquity and enjoy the magnificence of mosaic artwork that tells captivating tales of the nation's past.

2. Introducing Chercell Museum:

Founded in 1908, the Chercell Museum consists of four spacious galleries overlooking a beautiful courtyard. The museum includes a valuable collection of artifacts that were discovered in the region¹, and it is considered one of the most ancient antiquities found in North Africa. These works are distinguished by their uniqueness and beauty, as they include a sacred statue of the god Apollo in the capital of Yuba, statues of the Egyptian goddess Isis and Diana the Huntress, a statue of the god of medicine Aesquilab, and a figure of Hercules, among other distinctive pieces of art. In addition, the museum features an impressive collection of mosaics, such as the Agricultural Fields Mosaic, The Three Beauties Mosaic, The Triumph of Bocchus Mosaic, The Nine Arts Goddess Mosaic, and many more². The museum was classified as part of the protected national heritage in 1981 and became a national museum on November 29, 2009.³

3. Definition of mosaic: (Latin term *posephosis*⁴):

It is the art and craft of making small cubes and using them to decorate building facades, floors and walls. These cubes snap onto smooth surfaces to form various designs of different colors. Various materials such as stones, metals, ceramics, glass, shells, marble, and crystals can be used to make mosaics⁵. Mosaics are characterized by the stability of their colors and shapes due to the use of natural materials in their manufacture⁶. They depict engineering, natural, animal, religious, or daily scenes. It should be noted that the purpose of the mosaics was functional rather than aesthetic.⁷

4. History of the emergence of mosaic art in ancient Algeria:

The term "mosaic" is derived from the Latin word "musivum", which refers to a type of cladding used to decorate caves and sacred places. Subsequently, the term was used to describe wall and ceiling cladding in natural and industrial buildings.⁸

The oldest evidence of mosaics dates back to the Sumerians⁹ in the second half of the fourth century BC when traces of a mosaic painting were discovered in the wall of the Temple of the Gods at Tell al-Ubaid in southern Iraq. The painting was made of limestone covered with a metal layer of copper, and it was inlaid with carved shapes of seashells, oysters, and pieces of limestone to embody natural, human, and animal scenes.¹⁰

As for the origin of the mosaic, there are different theories. Some people attribute it to Greece, where floors covered with colored pebbles have been found in several regions, including Crete. These floors may date back to the Neolithic period. Pebble mosaic floors also appeared in some places of worship dating back to the seventh and

sixth centuries BC, such as the temples in Athens and Delphi. However, the high artistic value mosaic panels that represent the development of Greek mosaics are those found in "olynthos". They are characterized by a two-dimensional style that depends on color contrast, as they are designed in white on a black background or vice versa.¹¹

In ancient Algeria, the art of mosaics spread in the second century AD and flourished during the next three centuries¹². Mosaics were discovered in the luxurious homes of the cities of Timgad and ChercHELL, as well as in Lambez¹³. These paintings are distinguished by the depiction of daily life and myths related to the gods. At first, these famous paintings and mosaics were transported to various provinces. With the end of the second century AD, certain workshops began to become famous for their special methods and techniques in making mosaics, such as Timgad, Tazult, Setif, Gamila, and ChercHELL¹⁴. Nature's availability of raw materials with beautiful colors, such as marble helped the flourishing and spread of mosaic art.¹⁵

The themes of the scenes also varied between mythological characters in public buildings and the embodiment of people's lives in rural homes. The artists were inspired by the scenes from nature and reflected them accurately and realistically, focusing on daily details such as harvesting and reaping the fruits, their wild domesticated animals, hunting, religious scenes, etc.¹⁶

5. The contents of some of the mosaic paintings displayed in the ChercHELL Museum:

The ChercHELL Museum contains a collection of mosaic paintings depicting various topics that reflect different aspects of life. These topics include daily life, myths, gods...etc. Among the mosaics in the museum, the "Fieldworks of ChercHELL" mosaic stands out, dating from the second or third century AD. It displays the viticulture activities in the province of Mauretania Caesarea.¹⁷

This piece of mosaic was found on the property of a tribe in ChercHELL during excavations carried out by the researcher Glenat in April 1925. Limestone, marble and shards of pottery were used to create this mosaic, 10 shades and 20 harmonious shades of colour, including green and yellow and grey, white, black, red, purple and pink.

This painting is located in the southeastern hall of the ChercHELL Museum¹⁸ and is considered an educational or indicative painting on agriculture more than a work of art. The piece depicts agricultural activities such as plowing the land, sowing seeds, tending vineyards, and picking grapes¹⁹. It is a rare document that sheds light on the agricultural aspect, as the region was famous for its diverse farms in the cultivation of wheat, barley, olives, and grapes. The painting documents the various works that were carried out by local peasants under Roman control, and the subject is divided into four records, where each record targets a specific stage of these works²⁰. The upper scenes in the painting reflect the process of plowing the land and sowing seeds among the olive trees. The lower scenes depict a service process and the care of the vineyards²¹

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shows in the scene the peasants wearing heavy and thick clothes and long boots, which indicates that the scene takes place in the harsh winter season²². The scene also shows the dependence on animals in agricultural activities, as cows and bulls appear as representatives of the animals used in these various agricultural works.²³

We also find the scene of the process of harvesting grapes, Vendanges. In the upper part of the painting, the Vendangeurs grape-picker appears in the upper part of the painting, a trellis of reeds, and the leaves of the vine are green and free from bunches in the lower part of the trellis. The grape picker is shown using a ladder made of wood. The grape picker wears short gray-green robes with brown spots. He walks barefoot and places the harvested bunches in baskets made of witch hazel and coated with tar from the inside to ensure their stability when they are placed in larger baskets on the ground.²⁴



Fig.1.Sabah Ferdi,op.cit , 2005;

The third mosaic painting depicts daily life in the summer and dates back to the fifth century AD²⁵, where the scene of grape picking is presented. The painting features a frame decorated with geometric and floral motifs. The main scene in the painting, is setting the grape tree on a structure made of reeds. It centers around the work of the peasants while they are busy picking the fruits and putting them in baskets, as well as crushing them to extract the juice and turn it into wine.²⁶



Fig.2.A mosaic of rural activities and their transformation into alcohol by the locals, Nabila Sreih, Ibid, p. 23.

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The subject of hunting was also one of the daily activities that received clear attention since prehistoric times, as shown by the rock drawings in the Tassili, which prompted the mosaicists to complete high-level artistic paintings during the Roman occupation²⁷. The painting “The Hunting Scene”, located in the eastern hall of the Cherchell Museum, dates back to the fourth century AD, and was discovered in 1903 by Jolly. Limestone, schistine, marble, and pottery cubes were used in the creation of this artwork, with the use of various colors such as yellow, red, green, pink, white, and black²⁸. The record contains the killing of a deer with a hunting spear, by a knight riding a horse, and the deer is bleeding from the wound while it is in a prone position, represented by light and dark crimson colors²⁹. This painting reflects an aspect of the hunting culture and traditions of that period and gives an atmosphere of vitality and movement to the depicted scene.

Hunting scenes in the Roman world are shown in the wild or organized inside the amphitheater arenas with the participation of gladiators, and it is known in Latin as "venatio".³⁰

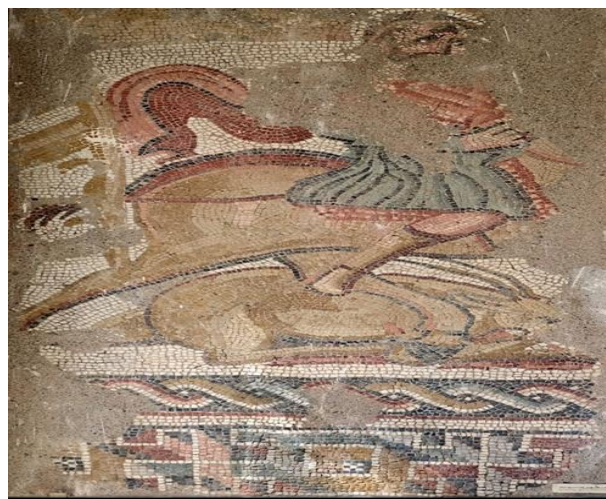


Fig.3.National Public Museum of Cherchell - Algeria:, n.d

Scenes expressing animal and plant life, as in the wild animal mosaic were discovered during the excavations of Glénat in 1920. It is located in the eastern hall of the museum. It was dated to the fourth century AD, which depicts a natural scene, consisting of trees, bushes, rocks, and wild animals such as gazelles, tigers, and camels.³¹



Mosaïque à décor animalier فيفساء الحيوانات البرية

Fig.4.Ibid

Among the mosaic exhibits, we find the painting "The Triumph of Bacchus", which was discovered in excavations carried out by the researcher Glenat in 1926, and the researcher Bérard completed the work in 1934 AD. The room that contains the mosaics measures 7.50 m by 4.30 m³². The mosaics are located in the western hall of the museum and are distinguished by their large dimensions, as they are 4.93 meters long and 2.75 meters wide. The Mosaic heraldic frame capacity measures 1.33m by 1.07m. The dimensions of the cubes in the mosaic range from 4 to 10 mm. Limestone, marble, and glass cubes were used to create the mosaics, and varied colors such as blue, green, yellow, dark red, violet, black, and gray were used.

The frame of the mosaic consists of three parts flanked by two thick white bands, each 6 cm long, and a double black line, marked by delicate, interlocking details of circles and spindles. In the bezel are warheads that form two large crosses and a small spindle cross, and the colors are mainly treated with red-brown, white and yellow garnets. The circles are decorated with drapery crowns and the different parts are processed in green, Yeni agate, pink and ocher green.³³

The aforementioned painting is characterized by the diversity of its geometric motifs, as it combines circles, spindle shapes, curls, and plant motifs inspired by leaves and flowers. Within these decorations, there is a frame depicting a mythological scene, which is the return of the god Bacchus from India in triumph.³⁴

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Mosaïque triomphe bachique فيبشاه التتصال باهرين

Fig.5.Ibid

There is also a mosaic known as "Ulysses and the Mermaids" in the inner courtyard of the Cherchell Museum, which dates back to the fourth century AD. This painting was studied by researcher Glénat in 1940. Terracotta, marble, limestone and glass were used to make it. A range of colors was used in the painting such as red, green, purple, yellow, blue, brown, gray and white.

The painting reflects the decoration of the house and the improvements that were being used at the time. The bottom of the basin is decorated with geometric shapes and drawings of flowers and fruits. On the wall of the basin, a scene representing one of the legends in Homer's Iliad, the story of Ulysses and the mermaids, is depicted.

According to Greek mythology, mermaids accompanied ships and boats and tried to lure sailors into the depths of the sea and drown them with their seductive songs. Ulysses was the first to escape the magic of the mermaids, who ordered his men to plug their ears with wax to protect themselves, and tied himself with ropes to the mast of the steamer so that he might hear the puppet song and escape death.³⁵



Ulysse et les sirènes فيبشاه أوليس و حرائش البحر

Fig.6.Ibid

6. Venus Bath Mosaic (Toilette de Vénus)

It is considered one of the most beautiful mosaic pieces preserved at the level of the museum. It represents the bathing scene of Venus, the goddess of love and beauty and the goddess of fertility among the Romans, who occupies the first place among the goddesses. Her pictures are spread in most North African sites, east and west, as the number of mosaics in which the goddess Venus appears in various positions and forms is approximately 22. She appears in this painting sitting on a coquille shell³⁶ in a cheerful atmosphere with mythical scenes, characterized by several marine creatures and various scenes.

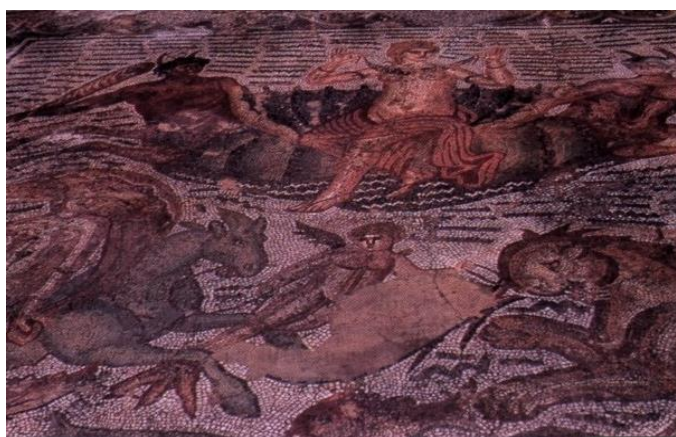


Fig.7. Sabah Ferdi, Uneven state of conservation of Algerian mosaics, C.R.S.A.I.B.L, 145 Year, N°1, 2001, p527

Conclusion:

The article has shown the importance of preserving the mosaic as a physical document, as the mosaic reflects a vivid picture of the religious, social, economic and artistic life in ancient Algeria. It deals with various topics such as plowing, harvesting, fishing hunting, etc. The mosaicists were keen to convey vivid images of the daily life of agricultural activity. Such as the cultivation of grapes and olives, which were an important part of the Roman diet. Mosaic paintings also give us a direct look at religious life and representations of Roman gods such as the god Bacchus. Animals also formed an essential element in daily life, so some of them hunted, in the early stages, to provide food and self-defense, to later become hunting predators in the Roman period for the entertainment of the masses. These paintings express the high level of civilizational progress reached by the ancient artists.

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To preserve the mosaics in Algeria for future generations, officials, archaeologists, scholars, and specialists in the field of cultural heritage preservation must give it special consideration. They must also employ every available method to conserve it, as well as contemporary methods for museum presentation. It serves to further our awareness of the past and our ancient history and is a significant component of our cultural heritage. To secure the continuation of our heritage and to advance knowledge in the future, work must be done to protect this historical asset and provide the necessary resources for research.

Footnotes

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