

BMA Behind the Scenes

Spring 2012

Cleaning a Mosaic, Inch by Inch



At the BMA, it's possible to look at a wall and see a floor instead.

Twenty-eight large fragments of mosaic floors from houses that had been buried for centuries in the ancient city of Antioch are mounted on the walls of the BMA's Antioch Court. Back in 1937, when the mosaics first arrived in Baltimore from an archeological

dig site in Syria (now Turkey), dirt still clung to their surfaces. After an initial washing, the damaged areas were restored and the mosaics were waxed to protect their surface. But over the years, dust and dirt has stuck to the wax, causing the mosaics to appear much darker than they really are.

Recently Assistant Objects Conservator Angela Elliott gave the 1800-year-old *Star of Lozenges Panel* its first serious cleaning. Lifting the 335-pound mosaic off the wall was not an option, so she climbed on the BMA's blue Genie Lift and got to work. Here, Angela has already used about 350 cotton swabs to clean the right

half of the panel. She will painstakingly clean each individual tile and crevice, first testing to insure that all parts are stable. After treating each tile once, she will make a second pass over the entire area with cotton pads, then take great satisfaction in the mosaic's bright new look.

Connecting to 21st Century Skills

When cleaning art works, care and patience are an absolute necessity. Angela must use the most delicate touch so that she doesn't inadvertently loosen any tiles. As she works on the small panel high on the wall, she must also be sure that the blue Genie Lift doesn't scratch the large mosaic panel below.

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Star of Lozenges Panel, 3rd century, and *Tigress and Boar*, 5th century. Antioch, Daphne. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.144 and .120

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