Kenchreai Panels Revisited

Kenchreai (pronounced KEN-cree-eye) is one of the two ancient ports of Corinth in Greece. During the excavation of this site from 1965 to 1968, a large cache of extraordinary glass mosaic panels was found underwater. They are one of the most important archeological discoveries of glass ever made. The panels date to shortly before A.D. 365, when Kenchreai was destroyed by an earthquake and its shoreline was submerged. Their fragile condition complicated their recovery and conservation.

Renewed archeological interest in the site brought two of the original excavators and a glass conservator back to Greece in 1995 to re-examine the fragments of 100 panels that had been found three decades earlier. One of those returning was Dr. Robert Brill, research scientist at The Corning Museum of Glass. The re-examination was initiated by Prof. Richard Rothaus of Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota, who is currently conducting research on the harbor facilities.

The panels (each about four feet long) had been discovered on the marble floor of a room in one of the harbor buildings that extended out into the water. These buildings had literally “sunk” five feet below the sea during the earthquake. The panels, buried in mud and gravel, were found in wooden packing crates leaning against the building’s interior walls. Each crate held two panels, packed face-to-face.

Scholars believe that the panels—most likely made in Egypt—were intended for use in a decorative frieze in Kenchreai. They were constructed by inlaying flat pieces of colored glass in a resin/marble plaster matrix to create geometric designs and pictures showing human figures, buildings, and Nilotic birds and plants. The two most spectacular panels show Homer and Plato. The matrix was backed by ceramic tiles for support. This technique is known as opus sectile (Latin for “cut work”).

All of the panels had suffered considerable damage from the earthquake and from their immersion in salt water for 1,600 years. The glasses have lost their surface colors through weathering, but many pieces still have colored glass inside them. Although some panels were rinsed in on-site desalination tanks, the glass in many of those that were not rinsed disintegrated upon drying.
Seven large panel fragments were sent to The Corning Museum of Glass in 1971 for tests and treatment. This is thought to be the first time that art works had been allowed to leave Greece for conservation or study. Shortly thereafter, they were inundated again in the 1972 flood, but no further damage occurred. The fragments were cleaned, consolidated, and mounted on various kinds of supports. In 1976, they were returned to Greece. Two of them are now on display in the Isthmia Museum near Corinth, along with eight of the largest preserved panels. The rest of the panels are stored in that museum.

The complete re-examination of the panels in 1995 was the first since the Isthmia Museum was built in 1977–1978. Dr. Brill and his two colleagues (Stephen Koob, objects conservator at the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C.; and Danaé Thimme, associate director for conservation at the Indiana University Art Museum) conducted extensive examinations of all the panels. They reported that about 35 percent are in excellent and stable condition, 45 percent need work urgently or will be lost forever, and 20 percent are beyond saving.

Mr. Koob, who was the Corning Museum’s conservator in 1994, remarked: “The dozen or so major panels which had been desalinated and treated shortly after excavation now appear remarkably stable, with the exception of part of one panel showing Plato.” Ms. Thimme, who worked on the original excavation, noted that the pieces treated in Corning are “bright and fresh-looking. They have been cleaned to reveal the original colors, and they clearly delineate the artistic composition.” The work in Corning, which had been directed by Dr. Brill, was carried out primarily by Steven Weintraub and Kristin Swain, who is now president of the Corning Foundation.

The most urgent need now, Dr. Brill says, is to provide an improved storage environment for the panels that are not on exhibition. “Placing the panels in closed steel cabinets in a centrally heated store-room would go a long way toward preventing the devastating effects of the annual cycles of hydration and dehydration that they now experience,” he suggests. “Such cyclical changes lead to the crystallization of soluble salts, which break up the still fragile pieces of glass that make up the designs.”

Professor Rothaus believes that prospects for funding even these minimal improvements seem poor. He worries that, for the lack of a few thousand dollars, many of these remarkable works of art—though now still potentially salvageable—will be lost during the next decade.

The team’s findings will be reported at the 16th Congress of the International Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, which will be held in Copenhagen at the end of August.

Museum’s Thomas Fragment Shows How Kenchreai’s Panels Were Made

The next time you visit the Museum, stop by the Roman gallery (Gallery 2, window case 32) to have a look at the Thomas Panel. This single fragment of a square or rectangular opus sectile panel was constructed of the same types of materials as the Kenchreai panels.

The Thomas Panel, which is said to have been found in the Fayyum, 100 kilometers southwest of Cairo, was acquired by the Museum in 1986. It is decorated with a cross composed of the Greek letters chi and rho (the first two letters of the word Christos, Christ), and a bearded figure identified, also in Greek, as Thomas. It is not known whether he is the apostle Thomas or another person with the same name.

This panel probably decorated the wall of an early Christian church. In any event, it was never subjected to the 16 centuries of immersion in sea water that the Kenchreai panels experienced. Its glass pieces are unweathered and still as colorful today as when they were made.

As you study the Thomas Panel, note the pottery “tiles” that were used as support, and the resin/plaster matrix into which the glass was pressed after the matrix had been softened by warming. Smaller fragments of birds and a fish, also on display in Gallery 2, could well have come from similar opus sectile panels.