

Grades 6-8  
LEARNING GUIDE

# EXPLORE

**ANIMAL SYMBOLISM  
IN A ROMAN MOSAIC**

Getty





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## FEATURED ART OBJECT

# Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left



Object Name: [Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left](#)

Date Created: 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE

Place Created: Syria

Culture: Roman

Material: Mosaic

Maker: Unknown

Dimensions: 196.9 × 115.5 × 7.3 cm  
(77 1/2 × 45 1/2 × 2 7/8 in.)

Gift of William Wahler

Getty Museum

The multi-colored peacock in this **mosaic** was created from stone cubes in Syria in the 400s or 500s CE. Such cut cubes of stone and other hard materials (ceramic, glass) were called **tesserae** by the Romans. The peacock's body is outlined in black. The stones used by the artist are not brightly colored, but the tail design is quite dramatic. It is outlined in red, and the interior colors are mixed pink and beige. The "eye spots" in the tail

### Mosaic

Technique and type of artwork. The technique is to arrange cubes of stones, glass, and ceramic to form patterns and pictures in cement, usually on a floor. The artwork is the final story or decoration made of cubes.

### Tessera/Tesserae (pl)

Pieces of stone or other hard materials cut into squares or cubes to make mosaic art.



# FEATURED ART OBJECT

## Iconography

Study of and use in art of repeated images with symbolic meaning.

## Syncretism

Blending of elements of different cultures, often resulting in new imagery or new interpretations.

are green, yellow, and white, outlined in black. If you look closely, you can see how the artist laid out the stones in and around the bird to emphasize the design.

In the original mosaic there were two peacocks facing one another on either side of a now-missing object. The mosaic was later cut into sections and although both peacocks are preserved, the object between them was lost. But we know from **iconography** (repeated images) in early Christian art that the birds likely faced a tree or a wine jug or wine cup. Grapevines surrounded the peacocks. In the lower left corner you can still see part of a large bunch of grapes. These designs suggest that the mosaic was probably in a church.

Early Christianity spread in a world that believed in multiple gods. Christians adopted the familiar Roman images they saw all around them. They gave them new meaning in a cultural process called **syncretism**. Peacocks, grapevines, and wine vessels were associated with two Roman divinities. Roman Bacchus (Greek Dionysos) was the god of wine, grapevines, and drinking.



## FEATURED ART OBJECT

### Attribute

Object, clothing, symbol, or physical characteristic associated with a specific person, hero, or god. An attribute can identify a figure in an artwork.

### Saint Augustine

Aurelius Augustinus was a Roman North African who lived from 354-430 CE. He converted to Christianity, became a bishop, and gained sainthood after his death.

Wine was thought to be healthful and to bring joy, and the god's grapevines renewed themselves every year, in a rebirth.

The peacock was an **attribute** (symbol) of the goddess Juno (Greek Hera). The eyes in the bird's tail originally belonged to a giant with 100 eyes. His name was Argus "All seeing" (Argus Panoptes). Even when some of his eyes were asleep, others were always open. Juno used Argus as her watchful guard. When he was killed, she moved his eyes to the peacock's tail. The bird shed its tail every year, but the tail grew back, a sign of its rebirth. Over time, Christians associated the peacock with purity. (**Saint Augustine** even wrote that peacocks' flesh did not spoil once cooked.) Its unsleeping eyes made the peacock seem immortal.



# VOCABULARY

## Attribute

Object, clothing, symbol, or physical characteristic associated with a specific person, hero, or god. An attribute can identify a figure in an artwork.

## Iconography

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## Mosaic

Technique and type of artwork. The technique is to arrange cubes of stone, glass, and ceramic to form patterns and pictures in cement, usually on a floor. The artwork is the final story or decoration made of cubes.

## Saint Augustine

Aurelius Augustinus was Roman North African who lived from 354-430 CE. He converted to Christianity, became a bishop, and gained sainthood after his death.

## Syncretism

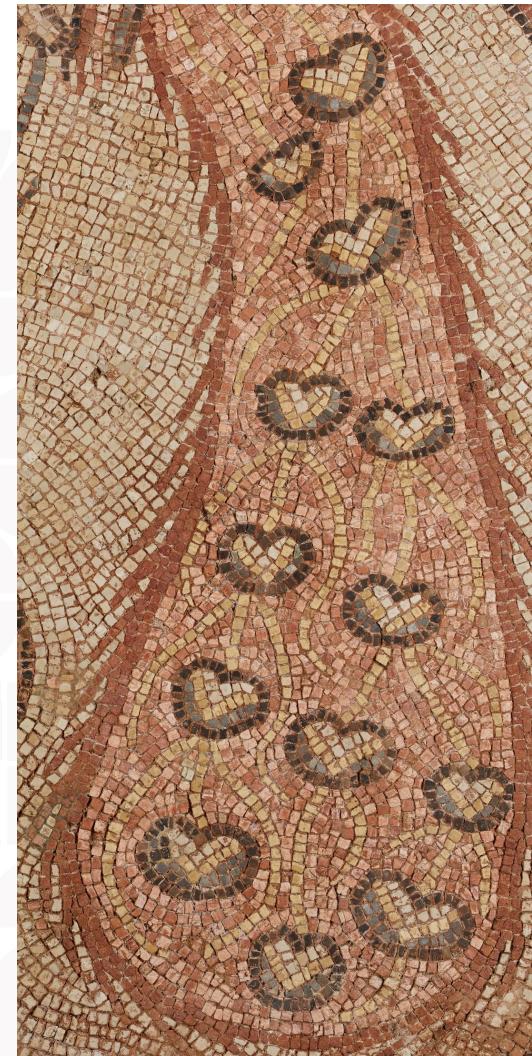
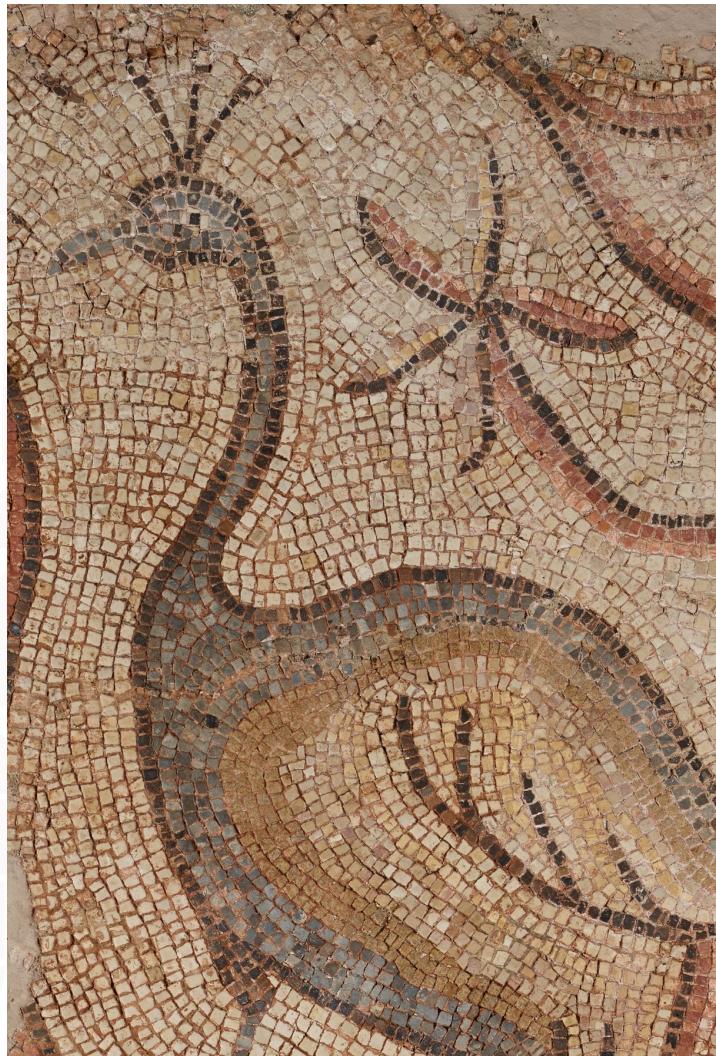
Blending of elements of different cultures, often resulting in new imagery or new interpretations.

## Tessera/tesserae (pl)

Pieces of stone or other hard materials cut into squares or cubes to make mosaic art.



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Closeup of Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left



## DISCUSSION

# Explore an Ancient Mosaic

45  
MINS

### Note for Teachers:

This activity works best as a lead-in activity before students read about or research the object and focus specifically on what can be discovered through visual analysis.

**Use close looking and discussion to make informed guesses and opinions about this ancient mosaic of a peacock.**

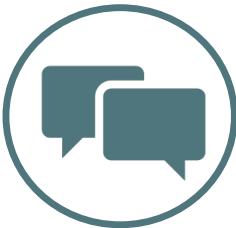
#### OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Examine and describe an ancient object
- Gain an understanding of mosaics
- Listen to others' perspectives about an ancient object

#### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- High-resolution digital images of [Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left](#)
- [A Brief Introduction to Roman Mosaics](#)



# DISCUSSION

**DIRECTIONS:**

1. Begin by looking closely at [Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left](#) using high-resolution images. Make sure to zoom in and out to notice small details.
2. Then discuss the following questions as a class or in small groups.

**Discussion Questions:**

- What do you see? Describe any details that you notice.
- What materials do you think were used to create this mosaic?
- How are lines and shapes created in a mosaic?

3. Next, read about mosaics in the article: [A Brief Introduction to Roman Mosaics](#). Answer the following questions as a class or in small groups.



# DISCUSSION

## Did You Know?

The colors of mosaics that are made of glass, ceramic, and stone don't fade after many centuries the way that delicate painted surfaces do.

We can still appreciate them the way they were meant to be seen.

### Discussion Questions:

- What is a mosaic?
  - What were mosaics made of?
  - Where might you find mosaics?
  - What are some other interesting facts about ancient Roman mosaics that you learned from the article?
-



## RESEARCH REPORTER

# Peacocks as Symbolic Animals

45  
MINS

**Research the symbolism of peacocks both in the ancient world and today.**

**OBJECTIVES:**

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Understand and explain the symbolism associated with peacocks from both ancient and contemporary cultures
- Interpret and present research findings

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**

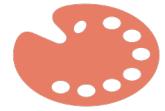
- High-resolution digital images of [Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left](#)
- [Featured Art Object information](#) for Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left



# RESEARCH REPORTER

## DIRECTIONS:

1. While viewing an image of the [Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left](#), read the related [Featured Art Object information](#) to learn more about the symbolism and beliefs of Romans regarding peacocks.
  2. Work individually or in groups. Answer the following questions, using both the Featured Art Object information and research on the Internet:
    - What did the Romans believe about peacocks?
    - What are some unique facts, characteristics, or traits of peacocks?
    - Are peacocks associated with the same symbolism across different times and places? Find three examples.
  3. Share what you learned by reporting verbally, creating a short slide presentation, creating a poster, or by writing a one-page explanation.
-



## ART-MAKING ACTIVITY

# Create a Symbolic Animal Mosaic Collage

90  
MINS

**Create a symbolic animal mosaic using paper collage techniques.**

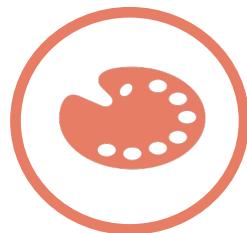
#### OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Understand how images are created using mosaic techniques
- Explore the use of animals as symbolic representations
- Reflect on and explain your creative process

#### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- A selection of templates or images of animals
- White copy or construction paper (approximately 8"x11" or 9"x12")
- Additional construction paper, cut into  $\frac{1}{4}$ "-  $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide strips (old magazines or scrap paper also work)
- Glue stick
- Pencil
- Scissors



# ART-MAKING ACTIVITY

## OPTIONAL:

- Templates with animal outlines
- Precut foam squares instead of construction paper strips
- Cardboard instead of white paper

## DIRECTIONS:

### Plan Your Project

1. Begin by choosing an animal you want to represent in a mosaic that symbolizes an idea that is meaningful to you or someone you know. You can use symbolism that you already know about or create your own.

### Make a Mosaic

2. Use a provided template, trace from a book or image, or draw an outline of the animal you selected on a white sheet of paper. Make sure the animal fills the page.
3. Cut small squares from the strips of construction paper and glue them down to fill in some areas where a square can't fit. Think about how the shapes fit together and what color choices you will make.



## ART-MAKING ACTIVITY

4. After you fill the animal with glued-down paper shapes, repeat the process for the surrounding background, using another color and considering how you can create contrast with the background.
  5. Continue until the entire sheet of paper is covered with a mosaic paper design.
  6. Share your design and answer the following questions in a short presentation in small groups or to the class:
    - Why did you choose this animal and what does it symbolize?
    - What did the creation process entail?
    - What part of making your mosaic did you enjoy the most? Why?
-



## RELATED LINKS

[Roman Mosaics in the J. Paul Getty Museum | Alexis Belis](#) online book from Getty Museum  
[Chapter on Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Left](#)

Video on [Ancient Byzantine and Mosaic Materials](#) from Art Institute of Chicago

[Ancient Mosaics Tell the Stories of Their Makers | Getty Iris](#) from Getty Museum

[A Brief Introduction to Roman Mosaics](#) from Getty Museum

[Mosaic Fragment with Peacock Facing Right](#) from Getty Museum

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# STANDARDS

## National Core Arts Standards:

- 6.VA:Cr1.1** Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas for creating art.
- 6.VA:Cr2.1** Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.
- 6.VA:Re7.1** Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.
- 7.VA:Cn11** Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

## Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

- SL.6.1.A** Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
- SL.6.1.C** Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.
- SL6.2** Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.
- SL.6.5** Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.
- W.6.1.A** Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.
- W.6.1.B** Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.



# STANDARDS

## Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

**W.6.2.D** Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.

**W.6.7** Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

**W.6.8** Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources; assess the credibility of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and providing basic bibliographic information for sources.

## California Social Studies Standards:

**6.7.8** Discuss the legacies of Roman Art and architecture, technology and science, literature, language, and law.