

This month's masterpiece from Hadrian's Villa is a mosaic depicting a group of doves drinking from an ornate bowl, known as the Capitoline Doves.



*Mosaic showing doves drinking from a bowl, from Hadrian's villa, 2nd century AD, probably a copy of Sosus's work (2nd century BC), Musei Capitolini, Rome © Carole Raddato*

The mosaic is made of thousands of small tesserae in a dazzling range of colors called *opus vermiculatum*, by far the most sophisticated mosaic technique. It depicts four doves on the rim of a large basin of gilt bronze. One of the birds is drinking from this extremely refined vessel, whose handle is supported by a caryatid. The mosaic panel is an *emblema*, a decorative element designed to be the central point of an otherwise plain mosaic floor. The *emblema* was originally an import from the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean, where, in cities such as Pergamum, Ephesos and Alexandria,

there were artists specializing in their production. One of them was [Sosus of Pergamon](#), the most celebrated mosaicist of antiquity who worked in the second century BC. The workmanship was said to be so perfect that real doves flew against the mosaic in a vain attempt to join their stone companions. (Source: S. Walker, *Roman art* -London, 1991-)



*Mosaic showing doves drinking from a bowl (detail), from Hadrian's villa, 2nd century AD, probably a copy of Sosus's work (2nd century BC), Musei Capitolini, Rome*

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The mosaic was discovered in 1737 during excavations at Hadrian's Villa led by Cardinal Giuseppe Alessandro Furietti. Some scholars believe the mosaic to be Hellenistic and that it could be the famous Dove Mosaics by Sosus of Pergamon who was active in the 2nd century BC and the only mosaic artist cited by Pliny in his *Natural History*. Other scholars however believe it to be a copy of Sosus' work made for Hadrian in the 2nd century AD. Numerous copies were made of this mosaic,

even into late antiquity. In addition to Tivoli, these have been found at Delos; at Pompeii and Capua; in Morocco and Tunisa; and in the Christian mausoleums of Santa Costanza in Rome and [Galla Placidia](#) in Ravenna. But the finest copy of the Drinking Doves is the one discovered at Hadrian's Villa. (Source: Umberto Pappalardo and Rosario Ciardello, *Greek and Roman mosaics* - Abbeville Press, 2012)

Pavements are an invention of the Greeks, who also practised the art of painting them, till they were superseded by mosaics. In this last branch of art, the highest excellence has been attained by Sosus, who laid, at Pergamus, the mosaic pavement known as the "Asarotos oecos;" from the fact that he there represented, in small squares of different colours, the remnants of a banquet lying upon the pavement, and other things which are usually swept away with the broom, they having all the appearance of being left there by accident. There is a dove also, greatly admired, in the act of drinking, and throwing the shadow of its head upon the water; while other birds are to be seen sunning and pluming themselves, on the margin of a drinking-bowl.

Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus, 23-79 AD), *Naturalis Historia* (*Natural History*), published around 77-79 AD). [Book 36, chapter 60](#).



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Today, mosaic is preserved in the Musei Capitolini in Rome and hence is known as the Capitoline Doves.

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