Piecing Together Pleasure
‘Mosaic of the Epiphany of Dionysus’ depicts a god’s triumphant homecoming.

Mosaics are such a ubiquitous part of the backdrops of our lives—adorning airports, underpasses, train stations and kitchen backsplashes—that we might overlook them when they represent great works of art. Yet their ability to disappear is a function of their beauty. Fusing ornamentation and architecture, flat pattern and illusionistic volume, mosaics are designed, paradoxically, both to reaffirm and refute—to open—the ceilings, floors and walls that they simultaneously constitute, embellish, confirm and deny.

We feel this magical marriage of monumental and decorative qualities in the most remarkable mosaics. And these contradictions are present in “Mosaic of the Epiphany of Dionysus,” a work about 5 feet high by 7 feet wide, and the three smaller attending mosaic panels depicting theatrical masks, each about 2½ feet square, on view at the Onassis Cultural Center NY through June 18.

Displayed separately like paintings along a wall, the four stone tesserae panels are segments of the roughly 1,100-square-foot floor mosaic from the banqueting hall of the Villa of Dionysus (late second-early third century). Recently restored (and exhibited here for the first time anywhere), the mosaics are part of “Gods and Mortals at
Olympus: Ancient Dion, City of Zeus,” a stellar gathering of more than 90 excavated sculptures, pieces of jewelry, vessels, implements and coins never before shown in the U.S.

The floor mosaics were discovered in 1987 at the site of the city of Dion, an ancient sacred center in the foothills of Mount Olympus, by the team of Dimitrios Pandermalis, curator of the OCCNY show, president of the Acropolis Museum, Athens, and director of excavations at Dion on Mount Olympus. Long preserved in a swamp, the mosaics were being damaged by water pushing up from beneath them. They will be permanently reconfigured and installed at the Archaeological Museum of Dion.

“Gods and Mortals,” the inaugural show after the OCCNY’s renovation by Perkins Eastman, looks stunning. Visitors now enter OCCNY’s basement galleries, painted aquamarine, via a glass staircase adjacent to a waterfall backed by glass and Jerusalem stone in a sun-drenched atrium.

Having previously seen the Dionysus mosaics only in reproduction, my heart sank initially at the OCCNY. It took me a minute to realize why they were not as forceful in person: I had been looking at them with their ornamental border frames—scrolling, scalloped, ribbony mosaic patterns that suggest intertwining rope, ripples and rolling waves.

At OCCNY, only the illustrative central panels are on view. Missing, then, are half their momentum and dynamics. Experiencing the Dionysus mosaic without its integral frames, which were too large for the gallery, is akin to experiencing a boat in dry-dock as opposed to riding the high seas. Seen within the surrounding frames, it's as if Dionysus creates a tsunami of activity—rippling, buckling and fracturing the plane. Here, it is more static. But the main illustration is so commanding and mesmerizing that, even borderless, it is well worth seeing.

The scene relates the myth of Dionysus, who, when he arrived in Thrace as a child, was persecuted but escaped, diving into the sea. The mosaic depicts his triumphal return, his rising from and parting of ocean waves. The god, holding a drinking horn and staff, and attended by Papposilenos, stands tall in his chariot, which is pulled by a pair of sea-panthers, whose reins are held by two ichthyocentaurs who carry a wine jar and krater.

Beautiful Dionysus, shifting and twining in space, is not pulled by—but pushes—the sea-panthers. The god of fertility, theater and wine who inspired frenzied orgies, he explodes on the scene, propelling and advancing in front of his entourage, dividing them like a V-plow. His entrance seemingly causes forms both to break apart and come into being. This is accentuated by the fact that the cream-colored ground-plane stones, generally organized in a grid, break ranks near the figures, where, as if stirred, they follow and flow around the figures’
Every inch of surface here feels in transition and alive. Dionysus’s shimmering and undulating flesh also evokes marble, water and sky. Subtle gradations and modulations of color (more than 100 unique tints and hues) make this unusually detailed mosaic closer to blended, monochromatic painting than most.

Weaving, sexy Dionysus, perhaps a little tipsy, appears so relaxed that I asked Mr. Pandermalis if his eyes were closed. “No, no! Wait...!” Mr. Pandermalis said, as he rushed away. Returning with a damp cloth, he vigorously wiped the god's face. Now wet, the narrow veins between stones awakened, becoming as active as the tesserae. Dionysus’s head blossomed—shone like a starburst. No mere backdrop, the god flitted between form and light, the ephemeral and the eternal, the mythic and the real.

—Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.