

COLOURS AND STORIES OF THE ITALIAN MOSAICS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The art of mosaic dates back four thousand years. The findings in Mesopotamia, in the rich temples and palaces on the Euphrates river, clearly indicate its use on the most ancient masonry. Subsequently, all the countries on the Mediterranean began producing different types of mosaics with variations in designs and materials used¹⁻³.

The Mediterranean was the cradle of this art: Italy and its islands, by virtue of their geographical position, acquired nearly every type of floor and wall mosaic, with figural and geometric decorative motifs of historical, political and religious origin.

The first examples of Phoenician mosaics of white marble tesserae which decorated *cocciopesto* floors (*opus signinum*) are dated to the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. At Solunto and Selinunte, Greek cities in Sicily, there are remains of the "sign of Tanit" in marble tesserae on *cocciopesto* floors (Figure 1). The sign of Tanit, a female divinity, is associated with the symbol of the male divinity – a bull's head surrounded by rays.

In the island of Mozia, near Sicily, there are mosaics made from river pebbles (Figure 2). This technique, associated with an iconography of oriental origin, and with a preference for hunting scenes or animal fighting scenes, was very probably introduced by Greek mosaicists.

In the southern part of Italy, which took the name *Magna Grecia* due to its numerous and powerful Greek colonies, there are countless brick floors, still preserved outdoors, with pleasing and inventive geometric decorations.

The productive Alexandrian period, from 300 B.C., saw a flourishing of Hellenistic mosaic and the technique of *opus tessellatum* (using tesserae obtained by cutting stone, and subsequently also ceramics and glass), a precious marriage of Greek skill and Egyptian workmanship. In Italy, these works adorned the homes of the wealthy Samnites, and later those of the Romans. In Pompeii they decorated the floors of public and private buildings; one famous example is the *House of the Faun*. Many of the so-called "Nilotic" mosaics found in Pompeii are now kept in the National Museum in Naples (Figure 3); among

these, there is the mosaic depicting the Alexander the Great's victorious battle against Darius (Figure 4).

Even the Nile Mosaic, an extraordinary floor mosaic which we shall describe in detail later on, constructed by Silla in the 1st century B.C. in an Iseum in the Temple of Fortuna Primigenia at Palestrina (temple and large lighthouse 50 km from Rome), is of Hellenistic origin.

The mosaics of the Roman imperial period, particularly those kept in the museums of Rome and in the Vatican Museum, testify to the Eternal City's wealth in the days of the Caesars, the richness of the precious marbles, the careful mortar-work, the sophisticated techniques for composing refined and admirable designs. But they also illustrate how, in becoming Roman, mosaic art began to reflect the characteristics of a nation that was still divided into castes – an enduring Hellenistic legacy.

The most patent example is Villa Adriana at Tivoli, where the type of decoration, the types and colours of the marble on the walls and floors, and the singular use of Luni marble, all differentiate the parts of the villa intended for the emperor's use (Figure 5a) from those inhabited by domestics, soldiers and servants (Figure 5b).

The great villas of Sicily had other functions. Villa di Patti, Villa di Piazza Armerina (3rd-4th century A.D.) and the others still being designed were built when the imperial capital was far away, at Constantinople, and their mosaics had the political purpose of displaying the wealth of the owner.

The floor mosaics depict the great hunts (Figure 6), and the transport from India, Egypt, Mauritania and many other parts of Africa – at the *dominus'* expense – of wild animals (Figure 7) that were shown in the circus to entertain the populace; the same populace which was subsequently called upon to elect the regent of the city.

Theodoric, king of Italy by will of the Byzantine Emperor, in the 6th cent. A.D. enriched his capital city, Ravenna, with Arian churches decorated with magnificent mosaics (Figure 8). These works reveal the Gothic king's love of this art, with their exquisite designs admirably executed by master mosaicists, using marble, coloured glass and tesserae with gold and silver leaf. Before him Galla Placidia, (Figure 9) and after him Justinian, (Figure 10) also gave Ravenna mosaics which embody the rich legacy of the Byzantine school of mosaic and glass-making art.

Unfortunately, we cannot describe all the mosaics that are kept in Italy, but neither can we neglect to mention at least a few great examples which exist in our country and bear witness to its history. Among these are the works adorning Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice, which is decorated with marble and sculptures brought after the last Crusade, but with mosaics designed in

Venice itself, whose iconography and technique mark the transition from the typical Byzantine style to the more descriptive Venetian style, inspired by the most famous painters.

We must also mention the works of that same period, which in southern Italy adorned the floors of the basilicas at Otranto, Trani, Trapani and Rossano Calabro. These are the "*books in stone*", which describe characters drawn from passages of history and religion, among the branches of the symbolic tree of life.

It is clear that priest Pantaleone, author of the floor mosaic design in the Basilica of Otranto, was able to consult the well-supplied library of the Basilian monks in their monastery not far from his native city in Puglia. Biblical characters from the Pagan and Christian periods are mixed with images from oriental religions and folk scenes inspired by the seasons (Figure 11). The tesserae used in this mosaic were cut from local stones – the same stones which make up the loose layers placed under the mosaic floor to improve its conservation.

The medieval mosaics which stand out, by virtue of their exquisite beauty, are the 12th century works in the Palatine Chapel and in King Roger's Room (with an Arab-influenced mosaic design) at Palermo, and those in the great church at Monreale (Figure 12), near the Sicilian capital city. In this church, the mosaics cover nearly the entire surface of the walls and vaults, depicting stories from the Old and New Testaments, over an area of 6430 m² (it is the church with the second-largest extension of mosaic decorations in the world, after S. Sophia in Istanbul and before St. Mark's in Venice).

In Rome, Giotto also measured himself with this art, and there are extant fragments of a large mosaic composed by him, which decorated the old Roman Basilica of St. Peter. However, after the sixteenth century, mosaic art was abandoned, and mosaic techniques were used only to imitate the major well-known works of famous painters. Examples of these can be seen in the new Basilica of St. Peter.

In the 20th century, mosaic art flourished again, and Ravenna has been one of the most important international hubs of this revival⁴. Among the modern mosaic artists who have already made their mark in history, we can cite Severini (a significant example is the Via Crucis, Figure 13) and Signorini.

2. THE MOSAICS TELL A STORY

From the countless stories narrated by Italian mosaics, we have chosen three which represent three significant aspects of human existence: the religious symbolism of the city of God descending from the heavens; the political power underlined by the splendid robes of an imperial court and the scenes⁵ of everyday life around a great river⁶.



FIGURE 1 - The "sign of Tanit" in marble tesserae on a cocciopesto floor at Selinunte (Sicily, Italy).



FIGURE 2 - Mosaic made of river pebbles in Mozia (Sicily, Italy).



FIGURE 3 - Mosaic from the "House of Faun", Pompeii (National Museum of Naples, Italy).

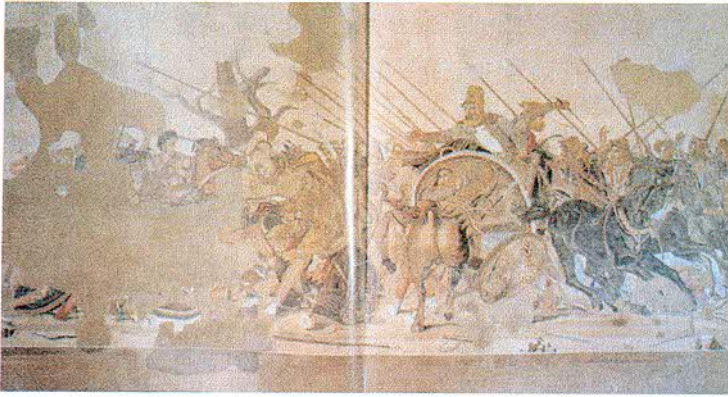


FIGURE 4 - Mosaic of Alexander the Great's victorious battle against Darius, from the "House of Faun", Pompeii (National Museum of Naples, Italy).



FIGURE 5a - Mosaics of Villa Adriana, Tivoli (Latium, Italy): from the emperor's rooms (Vatican Museum - Rome, Italy).



FIGURE 5b - Mosaics of Villa Adriana, Tivoli (Latium, Italy): mosaic of the imperial guard's rooms.

