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Madison's paper recieved a *QuaesitUM* outstanding paper award.

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Pietro Cavallini and Mosaics in Duecento Rome: Blending
the Italo-Byzantine with the Classical

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Abstract

In Italy during the Duecento, a group of mosaicists living and working in Rome were influenced by social, political, and religious events, trade and immigration, and the expanding wealth of knowledge throughout Italy. These artists were commissioned to work on many of the same projects around the city. Pietro Cavallini is one of the lesser-known and researched among these Roman mosaicists. New to the medium of mosaics, he received few commissions despite being an accomplished painter, having completed works throughout the city. This paper explores Cavallini's first mosaic commission, a six-panel cycle depicting scenes from the Life of the Virgin Mary, located in Santa Maria in Trastevere. By studying Duecento mosaic processes and analyzing Cavallini's works, this essay determines that Pietro Cavallini was a revolutionary artist who boldly broke away from the dominant Italo-Byzantine style and is responsible for initiating important contributions to the art of Renaissance Italy.

Introduction

Mosaic art is a creative tradition that has spanned the centuries. From the timeless, tiled floors of ancient Roman palaces to the vibrant, patterned walls of Islamic architecture all the way up to the do-it-yourself garden pavers in many backyards today, mosaics have been an integral and lasting artform in cultures all over the world. Popular examples are the geometric patterned floors and walls of ancient Mediterranean civilizations and the shining, golden expanses of the Byzantine empire's grand architecture and churches, but mosaics are also found in the floors of Mesoamerican temples and variations have been seen on the walls of ancient Egyptian tombs. This medium is unique in its durability. They can be damaged or removed but if left intact, these works remain unaffected by time. Because of the materials used to fabricate mosaic artwork, their colors are unaltered from the day the pieces are installed.

Some of the most remarkable examples of works in this medium are located within churches. In this context, these works serve to transform the architecture and sanctuary into a location that is symbolic of the heavenly realm. This medium has an exceptional ability to transform a space through the use of light, reflection and surface texture. Fresco and painting have an important and recognizable part to play in the decoration of three-dimensional spaces, yet through the use of mosaics the artist can alter the flat plane of a wall in order to create a glowing dimension capable of reflecting light.

During the Duecento in Italy, a handful of artists were known to have been commissioned to create mosaic works for important churches throughout the city of Rome and to have continued this art practice throughout the entire Italian peninsula. This paper will explore the life, works and style of one artist in particular: Pietro Cavallini. This artist's most notable mosaic work is a six-panel cycle, in which is depicted various scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. This paper will examine the production of mosaic artworks, identify the influences for figural representation and iconographical elements in Pietro Cavallini's works and suggest the important stylistic contributions of this artist's career on the art world of Rome during the Duecento in Italy through the analysis of several panels from the Life of the Virgin cycle.

Pietro Cavallini was a Roman painter and mosaicist.¹ His birth date is not definitively known to us. However, some scholars place it at some point in the 1240's.² He belonged to the Roman school of artists and worked at the same time as contemporaries: Filippo Ruscuti and Jacopo Torriti.

1 Julian Gardner, "Pietro Cavallini," *The Burlington Magazine* 122, no. 925 (1980): 255.

2 *Ibid.*, 256.

He also probably had some contact with Giotto and was likely a source of training and inspiration for the young artist.³ A contemporary document has revealed to scholars that Cavallini worked for Charles II in Naples in 1308.⁴ Documentation by Lorenzo Ghiberti from travels to Rome at the end of the fourteenth century attributes numerous works throughout the city to Cavallini.⁵ That list of works includes the six panels depicting the Life of the Virgin, as well as, the exterior façade mosaics of St. Paul's Outside the Walls⁶. Evidence for the work done at St. Paul's is scarce and as such this paper will focus primarily on the Life of the Virgin cycle.

Embracing a New Aesthetic

Towards the end of the Duecento, and moving into the Trecento, a stylistic shift was occurring within Italian art. A world that had been dominated by the Italo-Byzantine Style was slowly embracing a newer aesthetic approach centered around naturalism. The opulent gold and ornate patterning brought and shared by Byzantine artists had begun to decline in its popularity as artists and patrons alike turned their gaze back in time to the glory days of their own surroundings: Ancient Rome and the Classical sculptures and architecture that populated the very city they walked every day.

This shift in the arts of Rome was occurring simultaneously with a tumultuous migration of political power. The movement of the papacy to Avignon from Rome coincided with a dispersal of artists from Rome to other regions of the Italian peninsula. During this period artists, including Cavallini, left Rome for work in other cities such as Florence, Venice and Naples. There is evidence to suggest that Cavallini also took work alongside Giotto, Torriti and Ruscuti at San Francesco in Assisi⁷. When the papal court left Rome there was a significant, if not complete, decline in mosaic commissions throughout the city⁸. This cessation of work occurred immediately following a period of increased frequency in commissions. The year 1300 was the inaugural Jubilee Year established by Pope Boniface VIII⁹. This event indicated a year long heightened revival of the faith and meant that thousands

3 Stanley Lothrop, "Pietro Cavallini," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 2 (1918): 78-79.

4 *Ibid.*, 79.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 Carol Ann Hydes, *Italian Mosaic Art 1270-1529* (Sussex: University of Sussex Press, 2017), 86.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Paul Hetherington, "Pietro Cavallini, Artistic Style and Patronage in Late Medieval Rome," *The Burlington Magazine* 114, no. 826 (1972): 7.

and thousands of pilgrims would be traveling through Rome during this time. The work that will be analyzed later in this paper was begun c.1291 and was part of a city-wide explosion of commissions in preparation for this large ecclesiastical affair.

Mosaics: History, Practice and Use in the Duecento

Before launching into the detailed analysis of the Life of the Virgin cycle, an explanation of mosaic materials and installation processes will provide a fuller understanding of the practice during this period. Since antiquity countless materials have been used to create mosaics: shells, stone, semi-precious stones, pebbles, marbles, ceramics, glass and so on. Early examples of a style of cut glass known as tesserae began to be used by artists sometime around 260 BC¹⁰.

Tesserae are small cube shaped pieces of glass cut individually by hand. The process of producing tesserae and in turn mosaics, was extremely costly. It has been proposed that the cost of a single mosaic would have been four times as expensive as a fresco by the end of the late Middle Ages¹¹. By the Duecento, Italian artists had established glass making and mosaic workshops. The process begins with raw materials like sand, plant matter and minerals. Sometimes local sand could be used but as the techniques evolved better quality sands with less natural impurities were desired. Sand from the delta of the River Nestore or the west coast of Sicily and even imported sand from the Levant were considered the highest quality and had the least amount of impurities¹². Eventually some artists even turned to finely ground quartz powder¹³. This lack of impurities aided in reducing bubbles and striations in the finished glass.

The two most important basic ingredients in glass were silica and an alkali. Silica was derived from the raw sand. Alkalis were produced by repeatedly burning plant-based materials to produce ash with as few impurities as possible. In Italy, local ferns and a plant called *Salsola kali* became popular choices for alkali production. *Salsola kali* was often imported from the Levant along with high quality sands because it produced a purer alkali¹⁴. Silica and alkalis were frequently mixed with cullet, broken waste glass and discarded

10 Irene Rousseau, "Mosaic Art: From Pebbles to Pixels," Docslib, accessed December 6, 2022. <https://docslib.org/doc/13250717/mosaic-art-from-pebbles-to-pixels>.

11 Hydes, *Italian Mosaic Art*, 53.

12 *Ibid.*, 36.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 39.

tesserae, to encourage the materials to fuse together¹⁵. Once the glass was melted it would be blown into spheres to form one millimeter thick sheets called cartellina or poured flat to create filati which could then be cut to produce the small tesserae.

Prior to the late fifteenth century, a very limited color palette was used for mosaics due to the inconsistencies in colors that could be made by unreliable chemical processes. It was much easier for artists to form metallic tesserae. Therefore, until this point in history most mosaics are dominated by gold. The process for creating gold tesserae was entirely mechanic so a greater control over the consistency of color could be achieved. Gold leaf was layered between two cartellina until three sheets of glass and two sheets of gold had been attached with a binder, often egg white, and was then fused together in a furnace and slowly cooled¹⁶. The pieces were then trimmed with an iron tool that was heated and applied to surface to create a small crack that would be manipulated to force a controlled breakage¹⁷. Millions of tesserae were needed for most mosaic artworks and a process as painstaking and involved as individually hand making glass pieces one square centimeter at a time was a laborious, slow and extremely expensive process.

Once the millions of tesserae were fabricated the process of placing them began. A master would layout a cartoon of the final work, called sinopia, and lesser skilled artists and apprentices would be doing the painstaking process of placing each small piece, one at a time. Plaster was used to bind the tesserae to the wall and large nails would be driven through the surface to help support the immense weight of the millions of pieces of glass¹⁸. Mosaicists would individually tap each tesserae into two or three layers of plaster and then make sure that the plaster was level with the top most surface of each piece, wiping away any excess and cleaning the surface as they worked¹⁹.

As the artists worked the choice of the spacing for each piece and angle of the inset must have been decided upon. The choice of spacing and angles in mosaic work are indicators of the periods in which they were made. At the end of the Duecento, mosaicists seem to have preferred to set the tesserae at an angle, rather than parallel to the plaster, which allowed light to reflect off the pieces in many directions and also to place the pieces extremely close together, almost to the point that no plaster could be seen at all. This spacing

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid, 50.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, 51.

19 Ibid.

created a crisp and legible image even from a distance, as such would be the view experienced by a lay person sitting at the far end of a nave. These choices in spacing and setting angles are the case for the Life of the Virgin cycle by Cavallini.

The Life of the Virgin Cycle: A Deliberate Mix of Styles

Though Cavallini's choice of mosaic application was consistent with popular contemporary preferences, I would argue that much of the artist's stylistic choices show a deliberate separation from the previous route taken by artists in this period. Little has been published about Cavallini in his capacity as a mosaicist and of the current scholarship there is only one popular understanding of the artist's style that dominates the recent literature. Many scholars take the stance that Cavallini was a lesser talented artist that often held steadfast to Byzantine influences which resulted in his apparent lack of commissions during his career²⁰.

Several arguments have been provided as to why this position is so often favored. Paul Hetherington suggested that much of Cavallini's iconography was borrowed solely from contemporary Byzantine art²¹. Stanley Lorthrop argues that the Virgin in many scenes "preserves the majestic type peculiar to Byzantine mosaics" and that the arrangement of some scenes, most notably the Dormition panel, "strictly maintained" the Byzantine style²². Hetherington also stated that "Cavallini clearly rejected the archaizing tastes of both his contemporary fellow artists and of the patrons who could have provided him with more prominent and lucrative commissions."²³

However, in a compiled listing of works by Cavallini there are more than one hundred and sixty pieces attributed to the artist²⁴. This listing clearly demonstrates that Cavallini received many commissions and was not lacking in work. The issue is that many of these artworks are "no longer extant, in bad condition, or have been credited to other artists"²⁵. In an article by Catherine Fleck, she suggests that writings of early scholars and the condition of most

20 Gardner, "Pietro Cavallini," 256.

21 Hetherington, "Pietro Cavallini, Artistic Style and Patronage in Late Medieval Rome," 9.

22 Lothrop, "Pietro Cavallini," 81.

23 Hetherington, "Pietro Cavallini, Artistic Style and Patronage in Late Medieval Rome," 9.

24 Gardner, "Pietro Cavallini," 256.

25 Cathleen A. Fleck, "The Rise of the Court Artist: Cavallini and Giotto in Fourteenth-Century Naples," in *Art and Architecture in Naples, 1266-1713*, ed. Cordelia Warr and Janis Elliott (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 38-61.



Figure 1: The Birth of the Virgin



Figure 2: The Annunciation



Figure 3: The Nativity



Figure 4: The Adoration of the Magi



Figure 5: The Presentation in the Temple



Figure 6: The Dormition

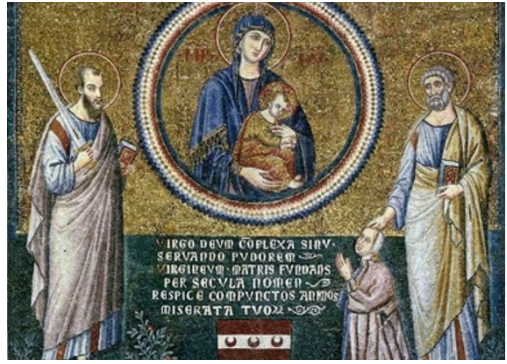


Figure 7: Madonna and Christ Donor Panel

of Cavallini's attributed artworks led modern scholars not to pursue the artist as a great master²⁶. However, in the first half of the twentieth century a renewed interest in scholarship surrounding Cavallini elevated his standing among artists of the Duecento and Trecento in Italy. It still remains an issue today that few of his works in mosaic have been analyzed on the basis of their stylistic qualities and thus the remainder of this paper will focus on just that.

The Life of the Virgin cycle is located in Santa Maria in Trastevere, a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in a neighborhood in Rome. The panels were commissioned at the behest of Bertoldo Stefaneschi, a brother of Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi²⁷. Bertoldo Stefaneschi donated the money for the installation of the mosaics in the early 1290's, possibly for the upcoming Jubilee Year set for 1300. The date often attributed to and most widely accepted for the cycle is 1291.

There are six panels in the cycle along with a donor panel located below the main register, each accompanied by three lines of text. These text below each image are verses of poetry pertaining to the scene above written by Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi for Bertoldo to have included in the cycle²⁸. The scenes included in the cycle are: the Birth of the Virgin, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, and the Dormition. The panels are located in a thick register immediately below the

26 Cathleen A. Fleck, "The Rise of the Court Artist: Cavallini and Giotto in Fourteenth-Century Naples," *Art History* 31, no. 4 (2008): 460-464.

27 Gertrude M. Young, "Notes on Pietro Cavallini," *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1923): 173-76.

28 Paul Hetherington, "The Mosaics of Pietro Cavallini in Santa Maria in Trastevere," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33, no. 1 (1970): 90.

main apse decoration depicting a scene of the Virgin and Christ enthroned in heaven that dates to the original construction of the church in the early twelfth century. Overall, the cycle is dominated by a large usage of gold tesserae. The background of each image, halos of each saint or Holy figure, and many patches of decoration on clothing and buildings throughout are colored solely by shimmering gold. The entire cycle is aesthetically cohesive, in that, Cavallini chose to employ a similar color palette and compositional layout for each panel. The color palette consists of gold, similar shades of blue and green, red, black and white with a very limited usage of pale yellows and what appears from images to be lavender.

The composition of every work contains a centrally located focal point with the remainder of the space filled by balanced figures and architectural forms, as seen in the Dormition, or left entirely empty, as seen in the Annunciation. Scenes of the Annunciation are extremely recognizable images whose subject matter is widely understood. This is the moment Gabriel announces to Mary that she has been chosen to become the Mother of God. Because of the familiarity with this scene and its subject matter, it will be useful to analyze in order to examine Cavallini's style and influences. The figures of both the Virgin and Gabriel are weighty and full. There is a heavy presence to their bodily forms. The drapery of the figures also conforms to the bodies in a manner informative of the anatomy beneath. The highlight on Gabriel's back side clearly reveals the indication of a torso attached to a muscular thigh that ends at a bent knee on his left side.

Both of the Virgin's knees protrude into space, delineated by large, wide patches of gold at each joint. It may even be observed that, strange as it is considering the Virgin has not yet conceived, there is a full, round, and pregnant belly beneath Mary's garment. The Virgin sits upon a wide, golden throne backed by an architectural structure decorated in a handful of locations with geometric patterns. The throne is depicted in three dimensions though not definitively accurate. Gabriel has beautiful red and green feathered wings and is shown with his left arm outstretched towards the Virgin. The figures rest on a blue-green rocky ground decorated with a smattering of vegetation. Mary is shown seated next to a vase of lilies and what has been interpreted as a bowl of figs²⁹.

The second and final image to be closely analyzed here is the Dormition. The Virgin, at the end of her life, sleeps on an ornate, gold bed covered by decorated fabrics. Her head rests on a red cushion and her arms are folded on

29 Livio Pestilli, "'Ficus Latine A Fecunditate Vocatur': On A Unique Iconographic Detail in Cavallini's 'Annunciation' in Santa Maria in Trastevere," Source: Notes in the History of Art 20, no. 3 (2001): 5-14.

top of her waist. She is surrounded by a crowd of mourners that contains some of the apostles and various ecclesiastical figures. Above the bed, the figure of Christ, in an orange and red mandorla, flanked by two angels, carries His mother's spirit up to the heavenly realm. The apostles and church officials are in plain, toga style drapery with a few gold accents. The bishops and Saint Peter wear sashes decorated by crosses. The ground is the same blue-green ambiguous, possibly rocky, surface. The background is a wide flat expanse of gold.

The driving impetus for the idea that these works belong within the Italo-Byzantine style is the vast, otherworldly gold backgrounds and the style of dress and patterning used throughout the pieces. To this, I suggest that these stylistic choices made by Cavallini were rather an attempt to unify his newer works with the previously existing decoration that surrounded this cycle from one hundred and sixty years prior. The Italo-Byzantine style flourished throughout Italy in the late medieval period, the same time the construction and original decoration of Santa Maria in Trastevere was begun. Apart from the excessive use of gold and a somewhat frequent application of pattern these works do not overtly bare any further link to the Italo-Byzantine style.

A possible explanation for the amount of gold used is that, as was discussed earlier, gold tesserae were a far more consistent and cost-effective material to produce in this period which would have aided in offsetting the cost of the already exorbitant price of a mosaic installation. Cavallini also appears to have desired to create a cohesive narrative between his own works and those that were already present in the apse, whether of this own accord or on behalf of the patron. The subject matter of the cycle as a whole fits flawlessly into the decoration of a church previously dedicated to the Virgin. The scenes, read from left to right, ending at the dormition lead the viewer across the apse and finally into the conch mosaic above of the Virgin and Christ enthroned.

This last panel in Cavallini's cycle is in direct conversation with the main apse mosaic and a contemporary viewer would have understood that Christ was carrying His mother, body and soul, into heaven to reign as Queen, which is then depicted immediately above. The patterning employed throughout the works is drastically limited compared to contemporary Italo-Byzantine works. Most figures, while displaying some minor gold ornamentation, are clothed in relatively plain garments. The most elaborate patterns are confined to small sections of architecture. There is a genuine attempt at accurately depicting a realistic three-dimensional space. As this work is quite some time before Brunelleschi developed linear perspective, it is on par or even more

advanced than contemporary efforts to show depth within works.

Turning to the depiction of figures themselves, the elongated willowy figures of the Italo-Byzantine style are nowhere to be seen. Cavallini has presented weighty and, for the most part, anatomically correct bodies with a truly voluminous presence. Their feet are firmly placed upon the ground, rather than pointed downward and giving the appearance of hovering over the earth. In the Annunciation, Gabriel's left foot is flexed into a position in which his big toe is pushing off the ground so as to force himself forward in space, creating a realistic sense of movement towards the Virgin. One further unique element of these panels that indicates Cavallini's revolutionary artistic practices is the presence of a signature. He is one of the first few artists to have taken credit for their works. This detail can no longer be seen today after some damage and various restoration but was included in a copy made in 1640³⁰.

Conclusion

Pietro Cavallini was a truly innovative artist who may not have received many major commissions throughout the course of his career. However, it is clear that through more detailed analyses of his works, scholars can come to appreciate this artist for his unique and groundbreaking turn away from the Italo-Byzantine style. This monumental shift towards naturalism, so often associated with Giotto and later artists, owes its humble beginnings to artists such as Cavallini. Elements of the artworks examined here can be identified in Giotto's later works and mature style which he likely was exposed to by Cavallini as young artist. There is much research to continue to be conducted in regard to Pietro Cavallini and it begins with the recognition that this artist was instrumental in laying the groundwork for a full separation from the Italo-Byzantine style, opening the doors for the rise of naturalism and the return to Classical works so loved by future renaissance artists and patrons alike.

30 Young, "Notes on Pietro Cavallini," 176.

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