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Valentina Cantone

On the Mosaic of the Main Porch of San Marco in Venice: Towards a Multi-Methodological Approach in Mosaics Studies

In the last ten years, some new studies have added an important contribution to the knowledge of the Church of San Marco in Venice. In this paper, I refer to the publications of several important journals and conduct the analysis of the political and ideological horizons in which the church was renewed [15]. I review the discussion of important critical issues about the production of glass tesserae and about the presence of Byzantine craftsmen at work [12] and point out the relations among iconography, liturgy, history and function of the atrium [5], with the other inner doors [16].

The inner portal of the church is still curiously isolated, far from the interest of scientific community (Ill. 29). The ongoing restoration will certainly offer new possibilities, thanks to the opportunity to analyze the mosaic from scaffoldings. We can expect new contributions on this part of the church during next years. In this portal, there is nothing I can have certainty about, just a lot of questions.

I will try to summarize some main issues concerning the inner porch of San Marco by critical approach. I will also try to propose a new perspective of study, introducing a research project held by the *Department of Cultural Heritage: Archeology, History of Art, Cinema and Music* and the *Department of Geosciences*, both of the University of Padua. The interdisciplinary team is composed of art historians, engineers who study new technologies applied to historical monuments, experts in archaeometry and multi-methodological analysis on glasses, metals, mortar¹. The group work is dedicated to an overall reconsideration of the portal by interpreting it as a complex structure of different, integrated and strongly restored elements, within its historical, political, ideological and architectonic context.

The Original Structure

The architectural framework of the porch decoration is arranged in three tiers, or maybe in four, if you also consider a hypothetical vault demolished in the 16th century in order to open a lightwell called “pozzo”. Here, I will not discuss the shape and the decoration of the fourth layer of the portal. I have to exclude its third level too, which is a sort of little apse decorated

¹ Rita Deiana and Giovanna Valenzano, in collaboration with Antonina Chaban, Gianmario Molin, Alberta Silvestri.

by the figure of Saint Mark in episcopal robes. This row was renewed in 1545 by the brothers Zuccati. Demus and Polacco agreed with the idea that the 16th-century mosaic figure of Mark can hardly correspond to the original layout for its highest position (it is placed above the figure of the Virgin and Child), and because it is already represented also in the first row, among the figures of other evangelists. We should take into consideration that the 16th-century restorations in San Marco were principally done with respect to previous iconographies. In Early Christian and Byzantine art, bishops are often placed in a very high degree. They play a central role in the construction of the identity of the Christian community, such as in Milan and in Ravenna [10], just to quote two examples. As recently stated, the iconographical program of the Katholikon of Hosios Loukas gives relevance to the figures of the saint bishops [6, pp. 20–21]. In the first half of the 12th century, the saint bishop was placed in the lunette above the main portal of the church of San Zeno, Verona [23, pp. 123–159; 24]. Before making each new historical and artistic statement, it is necessary to wait for the data to derive from the Geophysics prospections. Afterwards, it will be possible to enter into a more detailed discussion of that part of the portal, with its restorations or renovations performed between the 12th and the 16th century. In the meantime I intend to focus on the first two rows.

Demus and Polacco, who published more extensive studies about the porch [9, I, pp. 21–30; 17, pp. 30–34], are convinced that its first two levels were built in two phases. They both think that the original portal was composed by a single row of arches. For Demus the original porch served as the main entrance to San Marco 2 (10th century). It was decorated only by the second tier of arches, covered by mosaics in the last quarter of the 11th century. The latter represents the figures of the Virgin and Child, in the central part of the composition, and eight apostles, four on each of the sides. Soon after that, the portal was modified. The preexisting architectural framework was developed by adding the four evangelists in the lower row. According to Polacco, the portal was originally composed by this lower row only. The change was introduced in the early 12th century in order to statically balance the mass of the building by connecting the inner portal with the external portal. In his opinion, before this change, the portal served as a façade portal. Nevertheless, Fulvio Zuliani [26; 27; 28; 29, p. 50] has demonstrated that the atrium was already present in the architectural program of Domenico Contarini (1043–1071). Demus and Polacco had different opinions on the construction phases, the original shape of the portal and the mosaics chronology. Both of them deduce these opposite conclusions from the apparent irrelevance or non-conformity of the mosaics within the arches, from dissimilarities in marbles manufacturing of the two levels, from differences between the two rows of mosaics, which show the use of different colors, various alphabets (Greek and Latin), and different styles. Nevertheless, they agree on the stylistic similarities between the mosaics of San Marco and those of the Katholikon of Hosios Loukas.

Stylistic matters

Stylistic analogies between the ancient mosaics in San Marco and those of Hosios Loukas were proposed firstly by Otto Demus and Ernst Diez in 1931 [8, p. 114]. Even though the mosaics were largely restored, “restauratissimi” [17, p. 205], Polacco affirms that the evangelists are very similar to the apostles of Hosios Loukas and those of the apse of Torcello, dated second half of the 11th century [17, p. 204]. Efthalia Rentetzi [18; 19] insists on the parallels

between the style of Hosios Loukas and San Marco, but confronts the figures of the narthex with those of the portal; she underlines that there are only generic affinities between them. The studies by Irina Andreescu Treadgold [1; 2] and Robin Cormack [7] are more compelling, due to the accuracy of the method. They have considered the photographic and documentary archives, material analysis from scaffoldings, working methods of the craftsmen, and the impact of modern restorations. They clarified the chronological sequence of the Byzantine ateliers from the middle of the 11th century to the early 12th century by stating that after Constantinople and Greece the artists moved to decorate the churches of Torcello, San Marco, Trieste, and Ravenna.

The formal analysis of mosaics is necessary, because it puts in order the relative chronology of decorations in such monuments. It has some important limits though. Scholars have recently proved that changes in style are not always related to changes in time period or of a hand [12, p. 229; 21, p. 63]. Making the mosaic was a collective practice, directed by a master and performed by a group of craftsmen. The skills were taught from fathers to sons, or to competent learners whose origin is unknown. Moreover, there was probably more than one workshop working simultaneously, even if scholars tend to base their theories on a single workshop extending its work from Greece to Venice, generation after generation.

There are some other important critical issues that should be also taken into consideration. It is very difficult to interpret different stylistic levels in the same row of the main porch of San Marco. By considering the dignity of the figures in the context, it is possible to understand the change of the style [9, pp. 29–30]. For example, the words written in Greek and Latin were interpreted as a recognizable presence of Greek and Latin craftsmen. It could be also a sign of great importance of these figures. The Greek alphabet was used only for the figures in the center of the portal: the Virgin Mary, Peter and Paul. The same can be noted about the use of some colors. For example, there has been recognized a limited use of the bright orange, the so-called “arancione becco di merlo”, in the portal [9, p. 25]. Demus defined it as a “local color”, but recent studies have shown that it was extensively diffused in early Christian mosaics around the Venetian lagoon [20]. The bright orange was a very expensive color requiring large amounts of lead for its production. Its presence is attested only in few zones of the portal, such as the faces of the Evangelists². So it can be useful to study this color in a comparative perspective³. It was probably a deliberate choice made by the artist in order to underline a hierarchy of materials as the one of dignity, not only as an element to demonstrate the chronological sequence of the decoration in San Marco. We should also consider whether this color was always original, whether it was a re-used material or not. Did it come from the glass color production around the Venetian lagoon, or had it been already attested in other Middle Byzantine mosaics decorations? This comparative approach should offer new elements to understand the origin of such materials [14, pp. 35–46]. As believed by Forlati and Toesca [22, p. 10],

² This color is similarly used in Poreč.

³ It is possible by taking micro-fragments of material to be studied in the laboratory. There are two methods of minimally invasive micro-sampling: one consists in cutting a fragment of glass from the back side of the tesserae, the second means cutting a fragment from the corner of the tesserae. The choice of the method depends on the preservation state of the mosaic. In both cases, the micro-fragment of glass is analyzed and conserved for future studies.

the Venetian artisans were able to produce glass for San Marco. Unfortunately, the question of the origin of the material and the artisans [11; 12; 13] still remains. The presence of local artisans at work in the Church of San Marco still presents a problem, like in Sicily [4, p. 237].

A Portal without a Door

Another important issue of the inner porch is that of its original door. There are two doors connected by scholars with this portal: the door of San Clemente, considered the one that arrived in Venice from Constantinople around the last quarter of the 11th century [11], and the door commissioned by Leo da Molino, *Procuratore di rispetto* of the Church of San Marco in the year 1112 [25]. It has been recently considered to be a gift from Amalfi. The first problem concerning these doors is related to their compound form [16]. They are considered to be the work of Constantinopolitan artisans, but they do not completely correspond to the standards attested in the production of that period. For example, the door of San Clemente is without a donor. Moreover, the 28 panels, composing the valves, seem to be arranged without a clear program. It shows some very strange solutions: Saint John the Baptist is absent and Saint Mark has a marginal position (in the lower register of the composition, on the right side of the door). This is rather strange for the door of the church dedicated to this evangelist. Moreover, the names of the saints are written in Greek using different types of epigraphical characters. Though the figures are elegant, which conforms to the style of Byzantine doors of the 11th century, the door of San Clemente maintains a strongly heterogeneous character.

The second door is actually in use in the main porch. Its composition made of 48 panels is more coherent with the iconographic tradition of such work of art. It also shows the presence of local saints: Margaret, Fosca and Hermagoras. The donor, Leo da Molino († 1138), is represented in *proskynesis* in front of Saint Mark, in the middle of the right valve. The Saint symbolizes the gate into an eternal life. His position is coherent with the funeral function of the atrium [3] built at the end of the 11th century [29, p. 50]. The door of Leo da Molino seems to be more coherent with the decoration of the portal than the door of S. Clemente, because it shows the same figures represented in mosaic decoration. However, there is a chronological problem: the door was built from 10 to 30 years later than the portal. That is if we accept that the first phase of the porch should have been completed in the last quarter of the 11th century, before 1094, when the church was consecrated with the *traslatio corporis S. Marci* in the crypt.

Allow me to offer two different hypotheses. The first one is that, while waiting for something better, a simple wooden door must have been used. The second hypothesis is that initially the door of San Clemente was originally used to close the main porch [25, p. 283]. Even if these hypotheses seem to be true, there are some facts which need to be demonstrated. The door of San Clemente is lower and narrower than the door of Leo da Molino. The difference is not irrelevant, because it is about 49 centimeters in width and 113 centimeters in height. Could we think that the porch was modified by opening a large break to change the door? The other problem is that in 1112, it would be difficult to imagine such an important alteration in the dimensions of the portal for the wish of the *Procurator*, when the mosaics were already finished.

These questions can be answered by applying a ground penetrating radar investigation of the threshold. If the original door was narrower (we can calculate around 25 centimeters by side), we should be able to find the traces of the original walls under the marble slab on the ground.

A multi-methodological approach

The development of critical approaches and the advance of technologies and analytical methods applied to historical monuments lead us to new perspectives in our research. The time has come to reexamine the portal using a multi-methodological analysis of the architectural frame, mosaics and doors, obtaining new data to be interpreted, and defining new hypotheses about the shape of the original porch and the models used for the creation of this Venetian portal.

Title. On the Mosaic of the Main Porch of San Marco in Venice: Towards a Multi-Methodological Approach to Mosaics Study.

Author. Valentina Cantone — Ph. D., assistant professor. University of Padua, Piazza Capitaniato 7, 35139 Padova, Italy. valentina.cantone@unipd.it

Abstract: After large contributions made by Otto Demus and Renato Polacco, the inner porch of San Marco was rigorously studied, but only single elements of its complex structure were taken into consideration. Scholars have agreed neither on the chronological sequence of the rows which compose the portal, nor on the original portal decoration. The formal analysis of the mosaic decoration has been implemented to clarify the chronological sequence of the Byzantine ateliers from the second half of the 11th century to the early 12th century. Other researches made a new statement regarding the doors that arrived in Venice between the last quarter of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century, one of them actually in use in the main portal.

Many questions still remain. Was the portal structure originally made of three tiers or four (counting also the hypothetical vault demolished in the 16th century in order to open the light well called “pozzo”)? Are the differences in quality of painting of the same tier due to restorations or to a different approach used in the images of different saints? Was there more than one artist involved in the process? There are also a lot of questions about the original door of the porch. The actual door of the main porch opening was offered by Leo da Molino († 1138), *Procuratore di rispetto* of the church of San Marco in the year 1112. It should be dated 10 to 30 years later than the portal, if we accept that the first phase of the porch was completed in the last quarter of the 11th century.

The author reconsiders the recent studies of the main porch of San Marco drawing on an integrated approach. An attempt has been made to clarify the chronological phases of the architectural structure by using techniques like Geophysical prospections, analyzing glass materials, mapping different restorations and confronting the data of the multispectral analysis with the documents conserved in the archives of the Procuratoria di San Marco. The goal of the research is to study the mosaic within its structural, material, devotional, and ideological context trying to give the answers to all newly opened questions.

Keywords: Byzantine art; Byzantine wall mosaics; church of San Marco, Venice; main porch of San Marco; Geophysical prospections.

Название статьи. Старые и новые вопросы по поводу мозаики главного портала собора Сан Марко в Венеции: междисциплинарный подход.

Сведения об авторе. Кантоне Валентина — Ph. D., ассистент. Падуанский университет, площадь Капитаниато, 7, Падуя, Италия, 35139. valentina.cantone@unipd.it

Аннотация. После углубленных научных изысканий Отто Демуса Ренато Полакко внимание исследователей привлекали лишь отдельные элементы сложной структуры внутреннего портала собора Сан Марко в Венеции. Не сложилось единого мнения ни о хронологической последовательности появления рядов, составляющих портал, ни о его первоначальном оформлении. Стилистический анализ мозаик был привлечен для прояснения вопросов, связанных с хронологией византийских мастерских со второй половины XI до начала XII в. Были высказаны новые суждения о дверях, доставленных в Венецию в последней четверти XI в., одна из них сейчас используется в главном портале.

Многие вопросы до сих пор остаются неразрешенными. Одни касаются структуры портала — состояла ли она первоначально из трех рядов или из четырех, если принять во внимание гипотетически существовавший свод, разрушенный в XVI в., чтобы создать световой колодец? Другие — стилистических уровней в пределах каждого ряда, возникновение которых может быть объяснено как реставрационными вмешательствами, так и разной значимостью фигур или одновременной работой

нескольких мастеров. Немало вопросов вызывает дверь главного портала. Нынешняя дверь была преподнесена Лео да Молино (умер в 1138 г.), почетным прокуратором Сан Марко, в 1112 г. Следовательно, ее следует датировать десятью или тридцатью годами позже, чем портал, если признать, что первая фаза создания портала была закончена в первой четверти XI в.

Эти проблемы нуждаются в пересмотре с использованием комплексного метода. Необходимо прояснить хронологические фазы создания архитектурной структуры с применением техник, подобных геофизическому методу, в том числе направленных на анализ смальты, а также сравнительного подхода, соотносящего различные реставрации и сведения мультиспектрального анализа с документами, которые хранятся в архивах Прокуратурии Сан Марко. В основе такого подхода — изучение мозаик в структурном, материальном, посвятельном и идеологическом контексте, призванное дать ответы на старые и новые вопросы.

Ключевые слова: византийское искусство; византийские мозаики; собор Святого Марка в Венеции; главный портал собора Святого Марка; геофизические методы.

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Ill. 29. Main Porch of San Marco, Venice. The photo is published upon the kind permission of Procuratoria di San Marco, Venice