

DECORATION AS A SYSTEM. SURVEY AND CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

There are a variety of systematic approaches to the concept of adorned or decorated architecture, from the elementary dimension (including conceptual examples), according to which the decorative element originates and lives as “*seméma*”, to the larger and more complex dimension, in which the same “*seméma*” are organized in complex visual (and other) contexts. In architectural terms, Gino Chierici's 1957 classification for painted architecture may be considered valid. Chierici outlined seven categories: 1) “Texture in architectonic styles and orders”, in which calligraphic decoration tends to imitate construction material or tends to be inspired by precious materials; many “tapestry fronts” or “carpet fronts” of northern-oriental cities may be included in this category, e.g., “tessera fronts”, “rustication fronts” and “checkered fronts”; 2) “Decoration as a connection among or a completion of architectural decoration”, e.g., the Medici-Riccardi Palace in Florence and all fronts which have, for small surfaces, graffiti, polychrome painted “tesseras”, colored marble or stucco; 3) “Painted architectonic styles”, e.g., counterpoints of illusive completions of real architectural elements; 4) “Painted and figurative architectonic styles”, where some parts are available for the introduction of niches, panels and metopes; 5) “Prevalent and extended figurative narration”, which did not replace architecture in relief, e.g., the prisons in Saluzzo, Fontana Palace in Milan, Ricci Palace in Rome, and Scaglia di Verrua Palace in Turin; 6) “With perspective-architectonic inserts used as expedients to introduce section planes or external views”, in many 17th and 18th century palaces, e.g., Treville Palace in Casale, Birago di Borgaro Palace in Turin, etc.; 7) “Complete substitution of plastic decoration by pictorial decoration”, in many noble palaces in Liguria, Piemonte, Lombardia and Veneto, e.g., Villa Franzoni and San Giorgio Palace in Genoa, Cravetta Palace in Savigliano, etc., in which painted and figurative architecture animates and thoroughly characterizes building fronts which would otherwise be completely void of any type of relief ornament. But the problem is not clearly defined if for wall painting, terms - in non-standardized form - belonging to painted architecture, perspective illusionism, scene-painting, quadraturism, aerial perspective, *trompe-l'oeil*, etc. are used. Such reflections and considerations have led me to undertake research aimed at a chronological and typological classification of decoration and linking such decoration with historical and cultural origins so as to identify permanent features and transformations.

1. INTRODUCTION

A systematic approach to the concept of ornate or decorative architecture can be tackled in various ways: from the basic dimension – even if conceptually exemplified – according to which the decorative motif is born and lives as a *sememe* (as a minimum significant unit) to the more extended and complex dimension in which the same *sememes* are organised in (but not only) complex visual contexts, precisely characterized in the cultural sense.

Returning to more general considerations, to strengthen the importance of (colour related) decoration as a transversal language for all the arts, the experience of Matisse, who brought various objects from Biskara (in Algeria), such as the ceramics and fabrics often used in his creations, is ever-alive. More than the souvenirs, it was the objects of decorative art that changed his impression of the East. Islamic art became an important point of reference for him. In 1893, 1894 and above all in 1903, several exhibitions at the Museum of Decorative Art in Paris were dedicated to Islamic art. The vast Islamic collection of the Louvre was constantly exhibited, just as the Muslim countries were present in the pavilions dedicated to Turkey, Persia, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt at the World Exhibition held in 1900. Matisse privileged certain principles taken from Eastern ceramics as traits of his own language: pure colours, applied to large surfaces, the flat treatment of space and the reduction of drawing to the ornamental line of arabesque, a typical theme of countries of Islamic culture. For the artist, every excess can appear consistent, as long as it remains light and superficial, in order to obtain lively effects with simple means. Instead, in a closer reference to architecture, the classification proposed by Gino Chierici in 1957 for painted architecture is useful (a first example of the many, even if amply outdated), for which he fixed seven categories:

2. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. “weaving between architectural parties and orders” in which over-stylized decorations tend to imitate construction materials or draw inspiration from precious materials (marble, tapestries or fabrics); in this category, many tapestried or carpeted facades in the north-eastern cities of the Po Valley, but also rustication, tessera, panel and chequered coverings, could be included.
2. “decorations for linking or completion of architectural decorations”; here, one could include, amongst others, the Medici-Riccardi Palace in Florence and all the facades more or less treated, for small areas, with graffiti or painted polychromatic marquetry, or using marble or coloured stuccoes.
3. “painted architectural parties”, such as counterpoints of illusionistic completion of real architectural elements.
4. “painted and figurative architectural parties”, in the case of fields in relief left available for figurative variations, such as niches, panels and metope.
5. “prevalent flat figurative narration”, but not yet substituting relief architecture, as in the cases of the prison buildings of Saluzzo, and palaces of Fontana in Milan, Ricci in Rome and Scaglia di Verruca in Turin.
6. “with architectural-perspective inserts as expedients for introducing overhead *trompe l'oeil* or external views”, as in many seventeenth and eighteenth-century buildings, such as the Treville Palace in Casale Monferrato, the Birago di Borgaro Palace in Turin, etc.
7. “with the total substitution of plastic decorations with painted ones”, for many more-or-less affluent or aristocratic buildings in many regions (especially Liguria, Piedmont, Lombardy and Veneto), such as, for example,

the Franzoni Villa or the San Giorgio Palace in Genoa, the Cravetta Palace in Savigliano etc., in which architecture and figure painting is destined to animate and totally characterize building walls otherwise bare of any relief ornamentation. Yet, the problem – also at the lexical level – is evidently still not clearly defined, if the terms of painted architecture, perspective illusionism, scenery, “quadraturismo”, aerial perspective, trompe l’oeil and so on are used in an ambiguous manner for the same wall painting.

The problem becomes even more complex if thought is extended to Islamic decorations and architectures. From the considerations that initially spring forth, a first subdivision of decorative architecture can perhaps be confirmed:

- “structural”, intrinsic to the building material, aimed at enhancing and emphasizing the connotative values.
- “surface”, aimed at camouflaging the material’s visual aspects, to overlay them with characteristics and meanings referring to other constituent processes of the architecture.

Reflections and considerations like those described above stimulated me to start some research – in a forthcoming publication – aimed at correlating a possible time-typology classification of decorations to historical-cultural roots, following persistency, permanency and/or transformations over time. As regards the tradition of the cultural institutions where my training matured, the historical-geographic environment favoured when getting research under way was that of Greco-Roman classicism, compared with the areas of diffusion and

permeation of decorative models. The structure of the research plans for key features, icons, decorative elements and motifs, to be accurately listed and subdivided into:

- geometric motifs,
- architectural elements and motifs (with a section specifically dedicated to the orders),
- naturalistic motifs, and
- representative and symbolic aspects.

This is followed by the possible simulation effects (of materials or naturalistic trompe l’oeil) present and the list of the historical-artistic-cultural roots of first reference. A significant part of the report is dedicated to the methods of representation utilized (two-dimensional and three-dimensional representation, orthogonal and axonometric projection, perspective, application of shadow theory and the use of special visual effects) and the methods of vision.

3. EXAMPLES

The work is correlated to a conventional iconographic repertoire of the identified decorative types, approximately three hundred to date. Relative examples (see illustrations) refer to geometrical decoration (*Khatem*) used in Islamic culture, presented by Ms. Piolatto and Ms. Saponaro in a dissertation on color and decoration in Morocco, which I supervised. The study provides a peculiar example of formal construction represented by polygonal braiding, as shown in figs. 30 – 34.

Motivi geometrici		
1	1	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
10	11	12
13	14	15
16	17	18
19	20	21
22	23	24
25	26	27
28	29	30
31	32	33
34	35	36

Elementi naturalistici		
1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
10	11	12
13	14	15
16	17	18
19	20	21
22	23	24
25	26	27
28	29	30
31	32	33
34	35	36
37	38	39
40	41	42
43	44	45
46	47	48
49	50	51
52	53	54
55	56	57
58	59	60
61	62	63
64	65	66
67	68	69

In this case, as Georges Marçais sustains, the starting point is division. This simple splitting up of the complete element generally involves four subdivisions, of which one for the each of the two side threads of the weave and two for the space between the two threads. The tangents of the circle inscribed on the axis of division, with a radius equal to one of the two divisions, are sufficient to create the spaces and the “ribbons” of the weave (Fig. 30). The motif can be substantially enlarged, infinitely repeating itself and consistent with itself, or matched to other weaves. Inside its area is where the tangents to the little circles of the initial *Khatem* head, destined to produce the desired effects: the rosettes (as in Figs. 31 and 32), which involve four divisions, or like those in Figure 33 that generate five and a half divisions, or even the rosette in Figure 34 with nine and a half and that in Figure 35, which has seven divisions. In its simple version – as Hedgecoe and Damluii show – the motif is designed by a bare line, without thickness, almost immaterial. The weave is the opening to an impalpable third dimension of space in which the line, virtually continuous,

regains its identity and its freedom to run without end. The weave is then, for the materialized line, the means of freeing itself from the plane and opening into space. Suggested space, pure abstraction. If the line passes under another at an intersection, the latter will render the courtesy at the next occasion by passing under. The weave always has the effect of enriching the motif, breaking certain symmetries, as colour can do. With regards to determining the width of the weaves, it is necessary to know the ratio between the width of the weaves and the width of the original *Khatem*. Let us suppose that the small squares that are obtained after having broken the weaves are connected to the small sides of the Prophet’s ring: their sides are equal. According to this regulating hypothesis, the ratio that is sought will be approximately 0.23. The last photos presented show work by Ornella Zerlenga which reveal - through the geometric construction of the ribbon motif decoration of the pulpit in the Ravello Cathedral - the Arab-Islamic influence on southern Italian architecture via the Byzantine Cosmates.

REPERTORIO ESEMPLIFICATIVO DEI MOTIVI DECORATIVI.

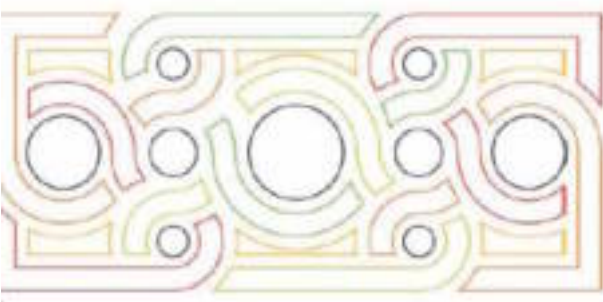
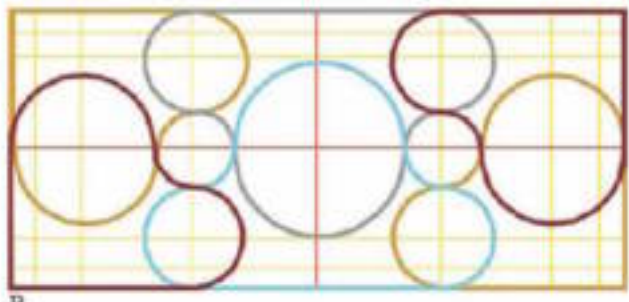
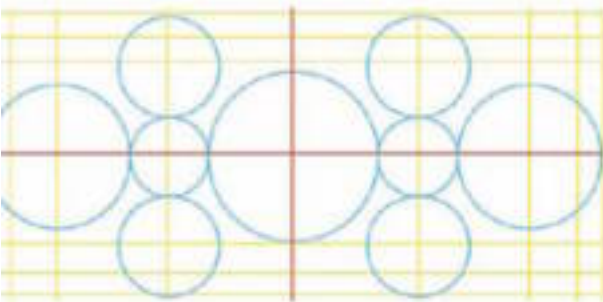
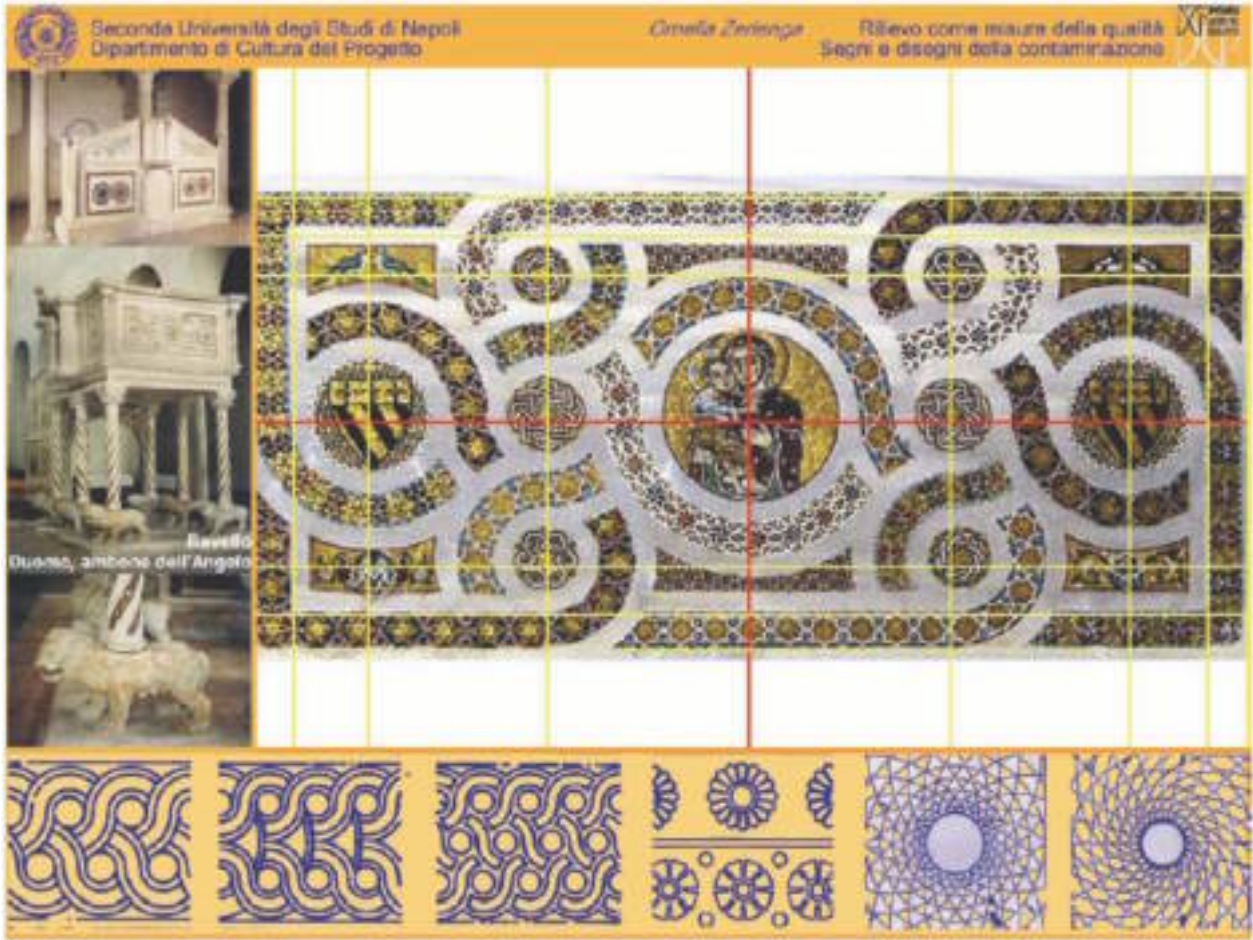
Motivi geometrici (1).				Elementi e motivi architettonici (2).			Motivi naturalistici (3).				Motivi rappresentativi-simbolici (4).		

MATRICI GEOMETRICHE ELEMENTARI E DERIVAZIONI COMPLESSE

The diagrammatic page is organized into several sections. On the left side, there are three large, highlighted geometric motifs: a red star-like shape (top), a yellow square grid (middle), and a purple triangle (bottom). Each motif is surrounded by smaller, detailed diagrams showing its construction and variations. To the right of these motifs, there are columns of text and smaller diagrams. The text is in Italian and discusses the geometric matrices and their complex derivations. At the bottom right, there is a list of references in Italian.

Colour plays an extremely important role in Moroccan art: it underlines the geometry. The more the geometric motif becomes complicated, the greater the number of the colours used. Until the constitution of the French Protectorate, the simpler motifs had a chromatic range limited to white, black, blue and ochre; with the arrival of French architects, the *zelliges*

created show simpler motifs, such as lozenges or squares, these becoming monochromatic thanks to the use of the same colour, in different tones, for the same work (Claudia Piolatto, Isabella Saponaro, *Il colore nel colonialismo: un mezzo fra tradizione e innovazione. Il caso del Marocco*, rel. prof. Anna Marotta, Politecnico di Torino, Facoltà di Architettura, a.a. 2001-2002).



Relief from a mosaic, the Angel's Pulpit, Ravello Cathedral, featuring braided knots. Inverse right-angle symmetry appears evident in the development-in-progress that characterizes the entire arrangement and its geometrical basis, which consists of a circular pattern that relies on a polycentric curve (Ornella

Zerlenga, *Rilevo come misura della qualità. Segni e disegni della contaminazione*, comunicazione agli Atti del Terzo Forum Internazionale di Studi "Le Vie dei Mercanti", Capri 6-7-8 giugno 2005).

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