

THE ROLE OF THE "MOSAICISTA"

In the history of mosaic, experience shows us that each mosaicist can be identified through the materials and the techniques used and improved in their work setting.

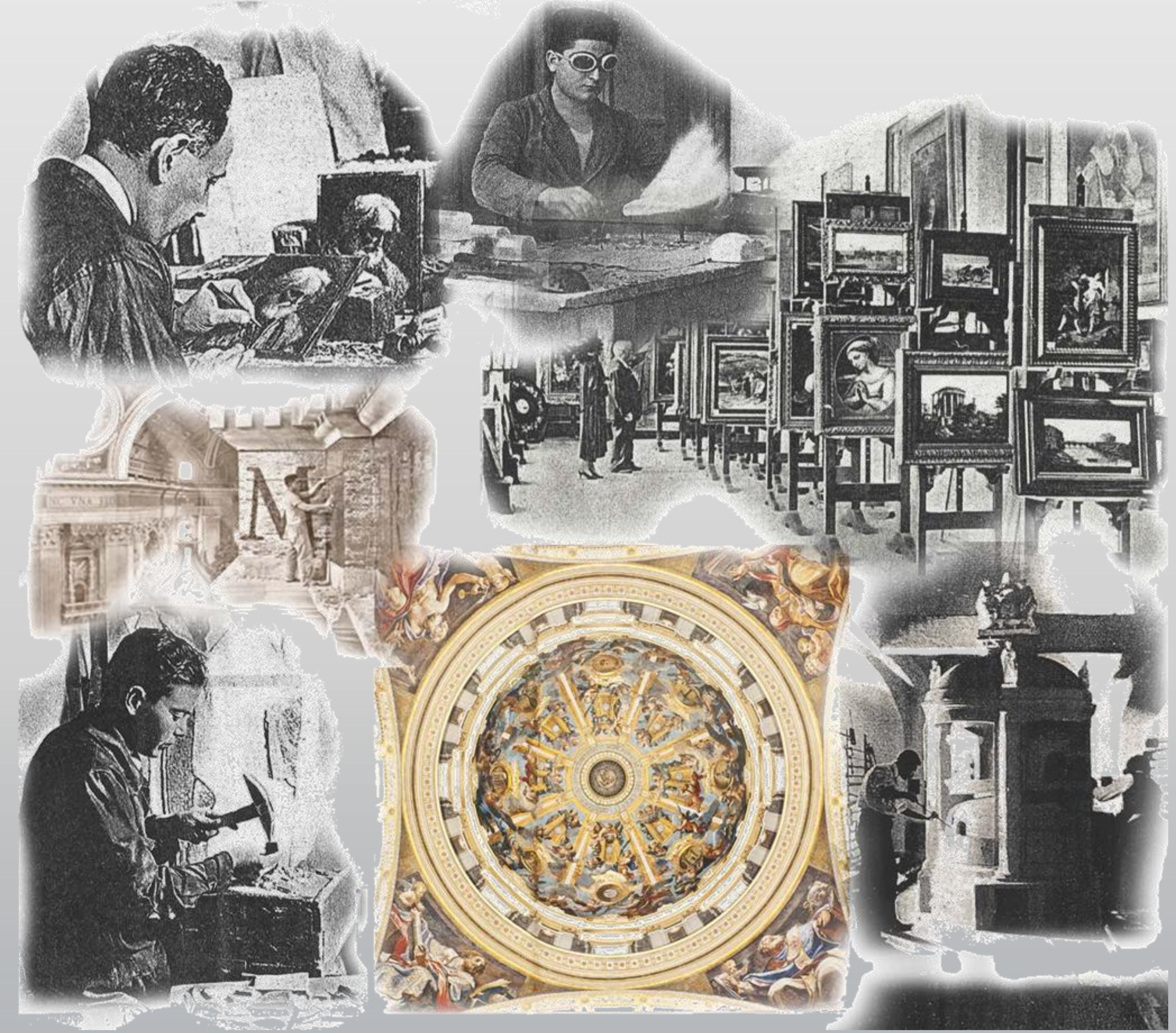
THE MOSAIC TRADITION IN ROME

Modern roman mosaic tradition begins with the mosaics that were created in Saint Peter's Basilica. The production of these mosaics was carried out approximately between the years 1500 and 1800, and covered thousands of square meters. This work gave rise to entire new generations of "mosaicisti", or "mosaic creators", who gave a start to an evolution in mosaics, both in the techniques and in the materials they used. Gradually, a brand new and exclusive artistic style was born.

One example of this is the filler used as a base for the mosaic tiles, called "stucco ad olio" (oil-based stucco base). It was used for the first time by Girolamo Munziano, one of the very first mosaicists who worked on the Cappella Gregoriana in 1580.

Another innovator in this field was Alessio Mattioli, who started producing new kinds of enamels in 1730, therefore adding an incredible variety of new colors to the ones already existing; the number of colors rose from the initial 150 imported directly from Venice, to the huge number of 15,000, creating new colors in warmer hues, therefore making the new colors resemble those used in paintings. These enamels were produced in the glass-blowing furnaces which were present both in the Vatican, and in the area surrounding Rome.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Vatican mosaicists reached the utmost level of their artistic creations, some canvas paintings from the altar of the Basilica were removed, so as to be substituted by incredibly realistic copies of the same paintings, but in mosaic. The level of realism was achieved precisely because of to the new materials used for enamels, and also thanks to the use of colored waxes. In other words, during these three centuries (1600 to 1800), we see new artists coming into the limelight, creating innovation in the roman mosaic tradition. Among these, the most outstanding innovators were Marcello Provenzali and Giacomo Raffaelli. Provenzali worked at the beginning of the 1600s, and improved the artistic technique, some of his masterpieces can still be admired in the Borghese Gallery, in Rome; and Raffaelli was the first mosaicist to use the so-called "spun enamel glass mosaic" (mosaico filato), with which he created extremely small tiles, creating the technique of "micromosaics", producing mosaics in large numbers, so as to be considered the most important artist in this type of production. Because of this, his masterpieces are always found among the most visible pieces of art in museums worldwide.

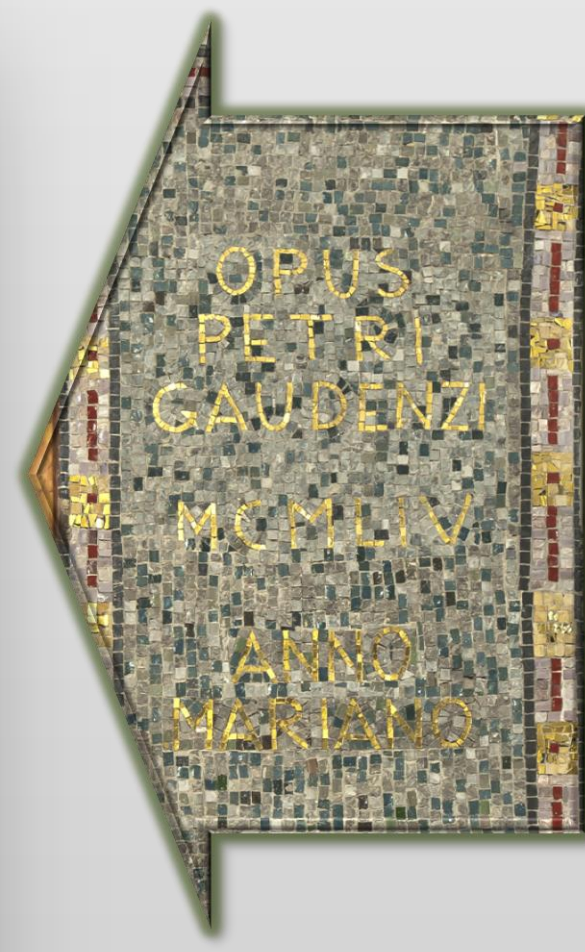


THE ROLE OF THE "MOSAICISTA" IN THE CREATION OF THE MASTERPIECE . . .

Mosaic in the crypt of the church of Saint Emidio, in Ascoli Piceno (in the Province of L'Aquila, Italy)

This artwork has been made in 1954 by the "Studio del Mosaico Vaticano" with the original drawing by Prof. Pietro Gaudenzi.

I clearly remember all of the mosaicists who took part in the execution of every part of this extraordinarily beautiful masterpiece; such as the Director, Virgilio Cassio, who created the more complex figures on the right side of the absys; or Fabrizio Parsi and Silvio Secchi, working on the rest of the mosaic. The working techniques, as well as the materials used, are all part of a centuries-old heritage and tradition, and as such they should be documented and passed on to the following generations of artists who both create and restore mosaics.



The mastery of these great artists continued manifesting throughout the twentieth century, with craftsmen of the highest level, whom I have had the honor of meeting in person, and from whom I have received great teachings.

Among the many mosaics they produced, there are also some made for contemporary painters.

But unlike what happened in the past, now modern mosaic creators were no longer allowed to show their names on the masterpiece, their own "FECIT", or signature, on what they had created.

"You mosaicist are only the midwives of this birth", a famous twentieth-century artist once said.

YET

the mosaicists, the craftsmen who carried out this ancient tradition for two millennia, have created with their experience and their constant evolution of techniques and materials, true masterpieces throughout the centuries.

The job of the true mosaicist is not only that of reproducing an image in pixel-like minuscule pieces, but also adding his or her own to the artwork with the choice of materials, of colors, sometimes even creating new ones; the mosaicist decides where to locate the highlights, the depth, and all of the small details, even in paintings of a very large size.

Therefore the mosaicist is not merely an "executor" of a job. He or she has an active part in the creation of the masterpiece, and for this reason, in past times, he or she wrote their names on their productions.

But nowadays it is quite the opposite. Anonymity of the artists has prevailed, even of very famous masterpieces, and the names of the artists are lost, or sometimes incorrectly attributed to mosaics created.



JOHN LENNON MEMORIAL (NEW YORK CITY)

This mosaic has been made in 1985 by the Cassio Brothers, Antonio and Fabrizio, third generation mosaicists. It has been wrongly attributed to Neapolitan craftsmen.

. . . . AND IN ITS RESTORATION

Knowing the artist's name is not only a fair recognition of the work done, but also becomes a basic need when a restoration work needs to be done on a mosaic.

For we can consider every single mosaicist as we would with any great painter.

Every single work of mosaic is created in its own unique way, which depends both on the single artist, and on the entire artisan workshop, with their own personal techniques and styles. Therefore, knowing who made the mosaic can help the restoration team to effectively and correctly carry out their job.

During the night of August 10th, 1992, in Saint Peter's Basilica, a large piece of ceiling mosaic fell off, in the Cappella del SS. Sacramento, due to water infiltrations which had reached the walls and the mosaics all the way from the roof. The restoration job was carried out by the "Studio del Mosaico Vaticano", and the team based their work mainly on their experience, and on the use of traditional materials.

The same miniature enamel tiles, the same oil-based stucco, but especially the same skillful craftsmanship were used to re-create a faithful copy of what had been lost during that night. The perfect imitation, perfect in both the use of the materials, and in its style, was carried out successfully and following the traditional ways.

With this short narrative, I simply wanted to show how wide the variety of techniques and of materials is, and how these in turn depend on the person who physically carried out the artwork, in other words every single mosaicist had their own set of preferences in technique and in use of materials, and these have influenced the mosaic tradition at large.

This being said, knowing the name of the executor of an artwork is not simply a precious piece of historical information, but also a useful bit of knowledge needed to accurately identify the techniques and the materials which were originally used. And which can creatively and correctly inspire the choices of the mosaicists in their works of restoration.

Cupola of the vestibule of the Chapel of the SS. Sacramento



Re-creating the missing piece of mosaic on a temporary clay base.

The piece of mosaic which fell off the wall at 6 a.m., on the 10th of August, 1992

Post-restoration Cupola Mosaic