RESTORATION OF SAN GIOVANNI IN FONTE BAPTISTERY MOSAICS

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ABSTRACT

In July and September 2014, a didactic workshop took place in the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte, Naples. In the restoration project were involved the Superior Institute for Conservation and Restoratio and Suor Orsola Benincasa University. Our intervention purpose was to deepen the study of executive technique of the mosaic and to realize a general project for its conservation. Mosaic conditions, indeed, were compromised by continuous water infiltrations from the roof and by microclimatic problems of the environment. The group attempted to activate a better reading of the mosaics, which was quite fragmentary because of numerous lacunae.

DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECT

The baptistery, built in 4th century, was part of the Santa Restituta church, later included in the cathedral of Naples. It is considered the oldest baptistery in the whole West. The decoration starts at the center of the dome, above the font, with a large Christological monogram. All around are depicted scenes from Christ’s life, saints, martyrs and the four apostles. The mosaic is realized with glass paste, embellished with gold tesserae (Photo 1). By opening stratigraphic section, we’ve been able to understand the execution technique. We found two different layers of mortars. A first one, thicker and wider, and a second one, the letting bed, on which every tesserae was settled. The masonry is composed by tuff brick alternated with red bricks (Photo 2 – Photo 3).

RESTORATION PROJECT

We started by cleaning the tesserae with a soft brush to remove the dust and incoherent sediment. Then we started to consolidate the mosaic surface by using Primal AC 33 and Mowital B 60HH. Once we were sure the tesserae were safe we started by cleaning the interstices from a blue painted mortar used in a previous restoration. The mosaic surface was cleaned using compresses of ammonium bicarbonate (Photo 4). Little lacunae were integrated with a new mortar and then retouched with watercolors (Photo 5 - Photo 6 - Photo 7).

CONCLUSIONS

The investigation on the executive technique and the critical study of the previous restoration works helped us understand better how to proceed with our work. We decided to remove only one of the previous intervention on the tesserae because of its wrong color and non-compatible material. We also decided to recreate with a new mortar some of the missing tesserae to guarantee a better stability to the mosaic itself. Because of its fragmentary situation, the mosaic had extended lacunae, filled in the last restoration work with a new mortar covered with a grayish acrylic paint. Removing this layer and let the original mortar visible again will give to the whole dome a better legibility.