

Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List

Historical background

The small cruciform building standing near the massive Basilica of San Vitale and known as the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia was erected in the second quarter of the fifth century A.D. as a satellite building to the Church of Santa Croce, being situated at the southern end of the narthex of the Basilica which the Empress had previously built there.

In origin the chapel was probably dedicated to St. Lawrence, a saint much venerated by the Valentinian and Theodosian Imperial family, who is depicted in the lunette on the wall facing the door. Presumably in the Middle Ages, it underwent a change of name and became known according to historical sources of that period as "Monasterium Sancti Nazar".

The present marble floor dates back to restoration work performed in the 16th century (1540). In 1602 the chapel was detached from the narthex of S. Croce and encompassed into the convent of S. Vitale. At this point in time the original entrance was closed and replaced by a new, smaller door on the west side. Then in 1774 this door was closed and the original reopened.

Between 1898 and 1902 the building was lined with yellow Siena marble and the Roman frieze put back into its position above the entrance door.

The present day slabs of alabaster on the windows were put up in 1908, a gift from King Vittorio Emanuele III.

Description

Built to the shape of a Latin cross (m. 12,75 x 10,25) it has a plain bare exterior fabric of short and large bricks divided by a 2 cm layer of lime, a traditional feature in the architecture of the whole of North Italy.

Over the crossing of the two arms of the cruciform building is a dome made of bricks and concealed on the exterior by a small quadrangular tower.

Owing to subsidence, the building is partially buried, its original floor being about m.1.50 lower than the present one. Therefore it is not possible to appreciate the original architectural proportions of the Mausoleum.

With the exception of the facade which was originally paneled with marble and connected to the narthex of S. Croce, all the sides of the building are dressed with pilasters which embellish and, at the same time, lighten the exterior of the building.

The pilaster are joined together on high in elegant arches and (though this is no longer visible due to the aforementioned subsidence) they rested on brick plinths.

Each arm in the cross plan is resolved by a triangular pediment, finished with a brick cornice, and within the space there described, there is a little window. A slightly larger window is placed on each of the sides of the drum, whilst narrow windowlets, resembling slits with an inner bevel, recur along the lower part.

The interior of the Mausoleum displays a lavish amount of decoration: in its lower part it is covered by panels of yellow marble, whereas in its upper part it is completely covered with mosaics.

In the center of the dome vault, which is in itself the symbol of heaven, against a deep blue ground is depicted a glittering golden Latin cross surrounded by 570 golden stars arranged in concentric circles, their intense glitter lighting up the deep blue ground like a nocturnal sky.

The longer arm of the cross does not follow the plan of the building and is directed towards the east: the shrine being built onto the narthex of Santa Croce, it could not, for practical reasons, be properly oriented, and so, the apocalyptic cross, linked with the concept of "the Rising Sun" is turned towards that point.

In connection with the cross are the four living creatures of the Apocalypse, namely the lion, the calf, the man and the eagle, depicted in the pendentives of the cupola as if they were continuously praising God, according to the description in the Revelation of John. Depicted in gold, they are rising out of clusters of multicolored clouds.

The glory of the cross thus appears within a cosmic unity. Similar apocalyptic representations, aimed at exalting the divine nature of Christ, are widespread in the West and, in particular, in Rome (for example, the mosaics of the apse of Santa Pudenziana, the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore etc.) albeit in different iconographical contexts.

Beneath a broad pavilion, in the form of a shell, four pairs of Apostles acclaiming, with their right hands raised, the eschatological cross shining above are depicted on the four sides of the drum on an indigo blue ground which, in its lower part becomes yellowish-green.

The pair above the left transept, facing east, are St. Paul and St. Peter, easily recognizable for their typical iconographic traits. In his left hand, Paul holds a scroll and Peter is carrying the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Between each pair of Apostles are peculiar decorative motifs: symbolizing the souls of upright men, two doves are either drinking from a water vessel or are standing by a fountain alluding to the solace of eternal life.

Similarly, in the lunettes of the transept, a pair of thirsty harts approaches a pool of water through a trellis of acanthus leaves. The whole scene clearly illustrates Psalm 42 which reads: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God".

The transept barrel vaults are similarly decorated. In the center of the little vaults Christ's monogram is set in a garland of laurel leaves. This garland is bordered with twining vine shoots which encircle four small male figures robed in gold. These are undoubtedly four Apostles, thus bringing the total number of Apostles up to twelve, including those in the drum lunettes.

Worthy of particular note is the scene of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence in the lunette on the wall facing the door. St. Lawrence is depicted advancing from the right towards a large gridiron beneath which a fire is burning. He is robed in white, but unlike the immobile and statuary apostles, moves with decision, his robes flowing out behind.

He resembles Christ, with a golden nimbus round his head, holding over his right shoulder a long golden cross as a sign of triumph, and in his left hand an open volume.

The face is fine and aristocratic, the close cut hair of a chestnut color, but the type is one which was never adopted in representations of Our Lord. The cupboard to the left of the mosaic contains the Books of the Gospels.

In the Good Shepherd lunette over the entrance, the youthful gold haloed Christ, clothed in purple and gold is seated on a boulder in a meadow with a rocky background with bushes, in an attitude of serene dignity.

His left hand leans against a cross and his right seems to caress the raised head of a sheep. Around him, a group of six sheep, three on each side, looks intently towards the Shepherd (the sheep in the lower left hand corner is completely restored). Noteworthy is the ornamental motif which completely covers the barrel vault of the entrance arm like a tent cover. The whole surface is strewn with white daisies, red and white rosette-shaped flowers surrounded by blue and golden rings and little golden globes which stand out against the dark blue of the sky.

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The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is one of the most extraordinary monuments of LateAntiquity which have come down to us, both for its architecture and decoration.

One of its most striking peculiarities is that it is both an Imperial mausoleum and an oratory dedicated to St. Lawrence, a martyr much venerated at those times.

Although, as aforementioned, there is no concrete evidence as to the destination of the shrine, many elements seem to prove the hypothesis that the building was originally conceived as mausoleum for the Imperial family: the pine cone at the top of the roof is a typical funerary symbol, the atmosphere of shadowy half light inside, evoked by the indigo blue of the mosaics, its narrowness and the diminutive size of the windows, as well as the iconographic program of the decoration, all go to suggest it was a sepulchre.

The building, however, breaks away from the tradition of Imperial mausolea with a central plan which are to be found both in the Eastern (Mausoleum of Galerius in Salonika, Mausoleum of Constantine in Costantinople) and in the Western part of the Empire (Mausoleum of Diocletian at Split in Dalmatia, Mausoleum of Helena and Costantina in Rome, Mausoleum of Aquilino in Milan) and derives from the cruciform Christian martyria which had their origin in the Roman funerary architecture.

For its plan and conception the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia belongs to the architectural tradition of the West: a number of similar cruciform buildings dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries are to be found in Northern Italy (Milan, Padua, Verona, Vicenza) and along the Adriatic Coast (Rimini, Pola).

Even the architectural motif of the blind arches, which run all round the lower part of the building with the exception of the facade, is typical of the Western tradition and is found in the church of Santa Croce, in the Placidian basilica of San Giovanni Evangelista and, generally, in the contemporary artistic world of Milan, as, for example, in San Simpliciano (end of the 4th century).

The exterior of the building is extremely plain, in sharp contrast with the interior which is a splendor of colors, figures and friezes, made even more resplendent when the golden sunlight filters through the alabaster corniced window panes.

As regards its decoration, it is the earliest and best preserved of all antique mosaic monuments and at the same time one of the richest and artistically most perfect. On entering the little oratory when one's eyes become used to the dim light one is overcome by rapture at the forms and colors which emerge from the mosaic surface. For, these mosaics extend as far as the vaults, lunettes, the dome and even the splays of the windows: they are the building's inner skin, luminous and continuous, emitting a radiance of their own because in the Early

Christian era only the inside, not the outside of a religious building mattered, the outer walls being nothing more than a negligible husk to protect the golden soul within.

The artistic concept of the mosaics which line the whole inside of the building was originally developed in the imperial courts of Constantinople and Milan in the last decades of the century but here in Ravenna, in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and, a short time later, in the Neonian Baptistry which reaches the summit of artistry.

In both monuments, as a matter of fact, mosaic blends with architecture in such a way that the latter is virtually dematerialized, as if transformed in pure colour, creating the impression that the outside world has been lost. The link between architecture and decoration is further established by the expedients introduced to give more light and a greater sense of space. The stars that shine in the blue of the cupola become progressively smaller toward the centre producing an illusion that makes the sky in further away. The impression of entering into a universal space is enhanced by the magical and refined atmosphere created by the exquisite and elegant decorative elements inspired by oriental silks and Sassanid art, as, for example, the floral decoration of the vaulting in its north and south arms.

The mosaic here is made up of golden spheres, small white daisies and great geometrically formed flowers with toothed petals, alternating with other stylized flowers, similar to snow crystals: motifs which constitute a two-dimensional decorative continuum, analogous to the floor level mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. There is, then, the feeling, of being under a sumptuous pavilion, adorned with precious textiles of exotic origin, stretching out to infinity.

In the Mausoleum the architectonic parts are therefore no longer marked by sculptural friezes as is still the case in the 5th century Basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome but by ornamental strips within the mosaic, as if these identified strict rules for the arrangement of decorative elements. Non figurative elements are sited on the curved surfaces of cupolas and vaults while on the vertical walls there are mainly figures and scenes.

Concerning style, all the mosaics of the mausoleum have features in common not found in Rome, nor Milan, nor Campania and which until the 6th century were characteristic of the mosaics produced in Ravenna. The human bodies are well formed under the drapery and have a presence and plasticity not found elsewhere in the art of late antiquity in the west. The contours of the figures are clearly delineated, the folds of the drapery are well defined which is in complete contrast to contemporary mosaics in Rome (S. Maria Maggiore) conceived and executed using rather impressionistic techniques as well as in Milan (S. Aquilino) where effects only of colour prevail.

The legacy of Hellenistic Roman art is to be seen in the figures of the Apostles who are still represented with the rounded forms and the relaxed movement of antique philosophers. Having an almost statuary reality, they solemnly emerge from a dark blue background robed in white tunics and pallia and with their hands raised, a Christian translation of the Imperial dignitaries who proclaim the victorious emperor.

Another example of how christian art has appropriated ideas and motives from high classical art giving them new symbolic meanings is the mosaic of the drinking doves which represent the souls of the dead drinking the purifying water of eternal bliss.

The theme is however very ancient, suffice to say that it was Pliny, in his Natural History, to mention the name of a Greek mosaicist, Sosos of Pergamum in Asia Minor, who lived in the 2nd century B.C. and was particularly famous for having created a picture of doves perched on edge of a vase. Roman copies of this composition have survived one of the finest being the emblema of a floor mosaic from the Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, now in Rome's Capitoline Museum.

The picture which has been considered the finest example of Early Christian mosaic in existence and which reveals more than any other the continuity of the classical tradition in Ravenna art is the Good Shepherd in the lunette over the entrance.

The beardless image of Christ, whose head is framed in rich brown hair falling in long locks on either side, has suggested a comparison with Apollo, while the posture His figure has been given, with repeated twisting of the body, reminds us of that of the mythical Orpheus.

All the figures are set in an enchanting and idyllic rocky landscape interspersed with trees and shrubs, in delicate tones of green, blue and brown, which stretches gently beyond, against a light blue ground typical of the Hellenistic tradition.

This is a truly refined composition, where each element has been placed in accordance with a talented compositive rhythm, whose perspective and colours; create the impression that the figures are blending away in the distance, an impression enhanced by the step of cleft rocks in the foreground, an ancient trick used by artists of the late Greco Roman period to create the illusive effect of a space which recedes into the distance.

This scene represents a turning point in Christian iconography for the Good Shepherd is no longer the herdsman of Early Christian art, clothed in short tunic and carrying a simple pedum or crook, as is to be seen in catacomb paintings and on Western sarcophagi dating back to 3rd and 4th centuries.

He is portrayed as Christ the Lord wearing imperial clothes, namely a gold dalmatic with blue clavi and a mantle of royal purple, features which testify to a direct influence of the ceremonies and art of the Imperial court, owing to the close contacts between Ravenna and Constantinople in that time.

The subject of the Good Shepherd is appropriate to a mausoleum, since the ancient liturgies allude to the departed as sheep taken by the Good Shepherd into the fold. Moreover, the image of Christ depicted above the entrance symbolizes the doorway to eternal life, the passing into the kingdom of heaven after death.

The occurrence of two subjects as the Good Shepherd and the Martyrdom of St Lawrence in one building of the 5th century is of great interest. In idea at least, the Good Shepherd still belongs to the early symbolic tradition, though the ancient simplicity has already vanished, while the other subject would be an early example of realism, though it is still only transitional, the saint enduring no pain.

Moreover, from the iconographic point of view it is worthy of note that the gridiron as the instrument of torture of St. Lawrence appeared for the first time in the mosaic of Ravenna and probably continued to be used in the later representations.

In the second half of the 6th century, however, on the triumphal arch in the Basilica di S. Lorenzo in Rome the saint is still portrayed wearing a deacon's dalmatic and holding only a cross and an open book. A fact which testifies to the originality of the representation in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia of his martyrdom.

St. Lawrence is the first figure that one's gaze rests upon on entering the oratory and the importance given to him testifies to the fact that this saint, to whom the Christianization of Rome is attributed, was greatly revered, as much by the church as the Imperial family. Churches were built and dedicated to him in, apart from Ravenna (S.Lorenzo in Cesarea), Rome, Milan and Constantinople itself.

The widespread veneration of this saint which represented the highest expression of orthodoxy might be considered in a certain sense a response by the civil and religious authorities to the ever increasing propagation of arianism.

Of outstanding importance is the fact that the whole iconographical plan has a unity of meaning: through faith in Christ, who stands as the way to eternal life, and through sacrifice and renunciation exemplified by St. Lawrence's martyrdom, we can attain to that salvation exalted in the form of the apocalyptic cross, symbol of the Second Coming, lauded by the Four Living Beings of the Apocalypse and acclaimed by the Apostles. The other funerary symbols in this decorative plan expressing the hope in eternal life .

The mausoleum was made specifically for Galla Placidia, who was sensitive to the problems of Christian spirituality in her time, it is probable that such a complex decorative plan was suggested by S. Pier Crisologo, her spiritual advisor.

All the decoration is in fact an expression of her faith in orthodoxy so that the apocalyptic representations of the cross and the four living creatures accent not the first coming of Christ but rather the second and therefore the divine aspect, already played down by Nestorianism and to greater extent by Arianism. The presence of imperial iconographies reveal the influence of the court at Constantinople during this period.

It is quite likely that, for the composition of a mosaic of such a high artistic level, mastercraftsmen from Constantinople were brought in, helped, obviously, by local craftsmen something which would fall within the artistic bond and high degree of collaboration which was established at the time of Galla Placidia between Ravenna and Constantinople.