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A modern miracle on the Mount

Rachel Campbell-Johnston gets the inside story of how an artistic and religious icon was saved from the ravages of 1500 years

The resurrection of one of the most important art works in Christendom can be celebrated this Easter. The magnificent mosaic of the Transfiguration in the church of St Catherine, in Sinai, has been brought back to new life. Now, as a long and extremely delicate conservation project reaches its conclusion, *The Times* can show the first pictures from the freshly restored apse that for some 1500 years has glimmered in the imagination of religious pilgrim and cultural traveller alike.

St Catherine's Monastery, built in the 6th century by the Emperor Justinian, once lay at the heart of the Holy Empire of Byzantium. It might seem a bleak outpost to the contemporary visitor — only a few drifting Beduin inhabit the desolate landscapes of the Sinai peninsula and the desert heaves ridges of barren granite against a hard sky. And yet St Catherine's, built around the site where God spoke from the burning bush to Moses and at the foot of the mountain that he climbed to collect the Ten Commandments, remains to adherents of three faiths — Christianity, Judaism and Islam — a piece of hallowed ground. The reclusive community of Greek Orthodox monks who now live there keep up sacred traditions that have remained unbroken for a millennium and a half.

Glittering at the heart of the monastery, like the flickering flame in a sanctuary lamp, is the great mosaic of the Transfiguration. This image represents that moment described in the Gospels when, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, Christ was divinely transfigured upon a mountain top. To the three witnessing apostles — Peter, James and John — he is revealed as the true Son of God.

Every day for 15 centuries the first rays of the sun streaming over the crest of the mountains have rekindled this image with their glorious light. To many it may be most important as an extremely rare surviving example of an early Byzantine mosaic. But to millions it is far more than just a piece of art; it is one of the most profound depictions of the revelation of God to Man.

The rays of gold and silver that stream outwards from its central Christ figure, prostrating the bewildered Peter, bringing John and James to their knees, flame out over the apse, filling the whole ceiling with shining light. The work becomes an embodiment of that biblical light that arrives with the first act of creation; that burns from the bush when God speaks to Moses; that blazes from Christ in the Transfiguration; that manifests the beauty of incorruptible divinity.

But how many more evenings would end at St Catherine's with the sun drawing its last glow from Christ's face in the apse? Over the past hundred years this has become an increasingly pressing question. The mosaic of the Transfiguration, along with its framing pendant portraits of apostles, a pair of flanking angels, and two images which, understandably, have become central to the monastery — one of Moses unfastening his sandals as he approaches the burning bush, the other of him receiving the Tablets of the Law — have for years been in great danger. Their existence is threatened by the sudden violence of earthquakes, by the gradual seepage of water, by the slow accretion of dust and



decay of old mortar, and by the oily black deposits from the lamps which, burning in the sanctuary, send their smoke twisting upwards, entangled with the monks' songs.

In 1847 one of the members of the community, Brother Samuel, made urgent repairs, fixing loose tesserae (the little coloured glass cubes from which a mosaic is constructed) and painting over patches where pieces had been lost. Then, at the end of the Fifties, a few more emergency repairs were performed by a team from America,

who even then were appalled at the state of the work. But it was only in 2000 that a specialist organisation, the Rome-based Centro di Conservazione Archeologica, was consulted. Its director, Dr Roberto Nardi, probably the world's most trusted expert in the conservation of mosaics, was about to be confronted by the most challenging project he had ever taken on.

Not that he would have known as he gazed up at the work from below. It was only when he had scrambled up

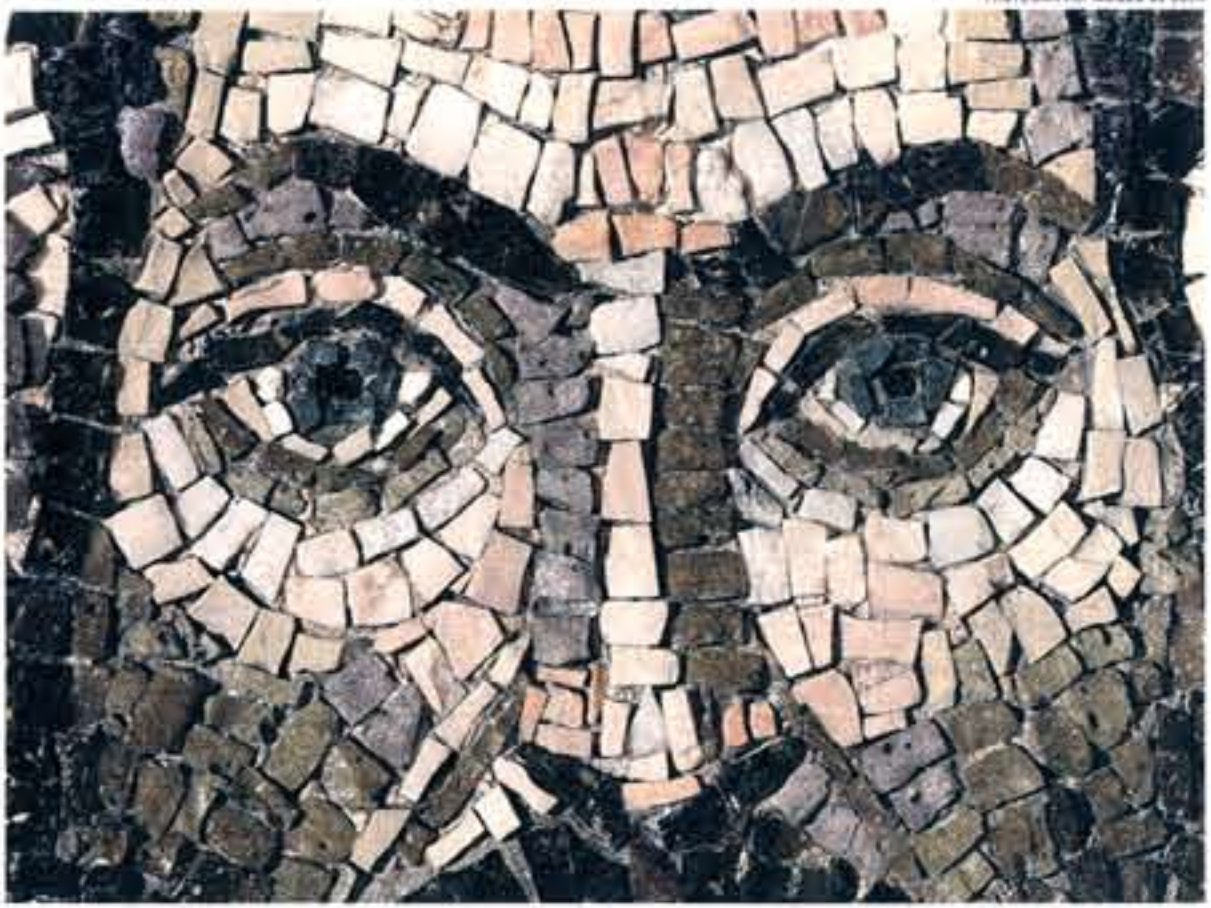


place — a bit like a bridge — only by the pressure of one tile pushing against the next. The worst-damaged area was the central figure of Christ. "To me it seemed a miracle that it was still there," Nardi says, "though the monks have clear ideas about who helped it not to fall."

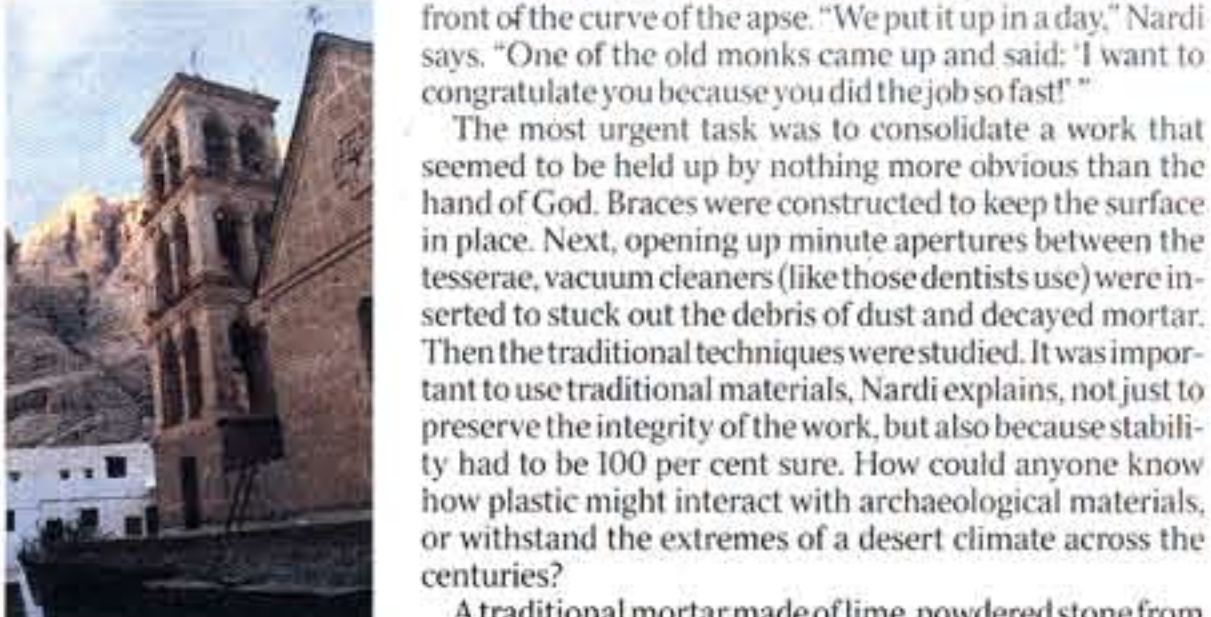
A rescue plan was hatched. Nardi, an ardent believer in the importance of on-site conservation, insists that works are not moved. It might be easier to take away the tesserae, clean them and set them back afterwards in a new bed of concrete, but this would be criminal, he says, the archaeological equivalent of the worst sort of facelift. "A mosaic is not just a picture," he says. "It's like a living thing. It is irregular. It is ageing. And, like an extremely elegant and beautiful old woman, its irregularities are part of its character and life."

Nardi's organisation, which was approaching its 25th anniversary, decided to mark the occasion by offering to work on a not-for-profit basis. But still, \$500,000 (£340,000) was needed to cover basic costs. This sum was made available by the Emir of Qatar — a symbol of Christianity was to be paid for by an Islamic ruler. This may seem unexpected, but not to anyone familiar with the history of St Catherine's. This sort of interfaith co-operation is utterly in accordance with the spirit of the place.

St Catherine's has always offered food, shelter and work to the local Beduin community. It includes a mosque within its walls. It holds in its library (alongside the many rich gifts from visiting pilgrims) a document signed with the handprint of the Prophet Muhammad who, according to



clockwise from main picture: Moses and the burning bush; a detail, showing the mosaic work, from a representation of the monk Longinus; cleaning the figure of Christ at the centre of the Transfiguration scene; the bell tower and minaret of the faith-straddling St Catherine's monastery; a conservator working on a bottom frieze



legend, once visited the monastery and left his blessing. It was clearly a highly effective protective force. Where every other Byzantine community was attacked by Arab marauders (or ripped apart by iconoclasts of their own faith, of course), St Catherine's has never been violated.

In 2005, restoration work finally began on the mosaic: two teams of conservators set to work, turn and turn about, on two-month stints. "We could take our time because we were not working for profit," Nardi says. But also, he explains, for all the serenity of the landscape and the hospitality of the monks, the task was a hard one — not least when the shufflings of prayer-mumbling pilgrims preparing to climb the holy mountain wake you every morning at three. If you get tired your hands are not stable and your concentration is not good.

"This was technically the most complicated project we had ever faced," Nardi says. Added to that, it had to be undertaken without disturbing the rituals of the daily liturgy. A canvas replica of the mosaic was hung like a curtain in front of the curve of the apse. "We put it up in a day," Nardi says. "One of the old monks came up and said: 'I want to congratulate you because you did the job so fast!'"

The most urgent task was to consolidate a work that seemed to be held up by nothing more obvious than the hand of God. Braces were constructed to keep the surface in place. Next, opening up minute apertures between the tesserae, vacuum cleaners (like those dentists use) were inserted to suck out the debris of dust and decayed mortar. Then the traditional techniques were studied. It was important to use traditional materials, Nardi explains, not just to preserve the integrity of the work, but also because stability had to be 100 per cent sure. How could anyone know how plastic might interact with archaeological materials, or withstand the extremes of a desert climate across the centuries?

A traditional mortar made of lime, powdered stone from local rocks and straw was inserted by conservators who, working patch by 4 sq in patch, took two years to consolidate most of the area. Then they took a six-month break to monitor the results before broaching the most severely damaged area — the central Christ figure. It was finished in a month. It must have been as satisfying as dropping the last pieces of a puzzle into place.

About 4 per cent of the tesserae were missing. Once it would have been considered unethical to insert replicas, Nardi says — old Brother Samuel with his painting was intuitively right. And yet, Nardi says, "a mosaic made of glass and gold is alive: it comes to life when it is touched with light in a way that a painted surface can never do."

Since, with digital technology, the details of every individual tessera can be recorded, the insertion of modern pieces no longer need be seen as "fakes". A Venetian glass-maker was found who could match the mosaic's probably unparalleled range of 35 different colours.

The monks wanted to recapture the first refulgence of the Transfiguration. "One of the biggest things that I learnt from this project," Nardi says, "was the importance of discussion with the local community. It's easy to move in like imperious professionals, but in reality we are only servants of a monument that has its own life and one that belongs to its local community before anyone." The mosaics of St Catherine's are for the monks first and foremost an instrument of prayer. They have a theological meaning which is more important than our conservators' principles.

Perhaps this is the meaning that lends them their deepest significance and with it their life. "Gather me/ Into the artifice of eternity," Yeats wrote in his great *Byzantium*. You may not be a believer, but how can you not feel the truth of his yearning as you crane your neck upwards and gaze into the magical glimmer of this great work?

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